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Sacred Weather
Atmospheric Essentialism in the Fiction of John McGahern

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Sacred Weather: Atmospheric Essentialism in the Fiction of John McGahern

by

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Department of English

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	3
Abstract	4
Introduction	5
1. Being Green: Atmospheric Essentialism in Irish Culture	22
2. Place-World and Refrain: John McGahern's Material World	84
3. A Child is Being Beaten: Anatomy of Reaction to <i>The Dark</i>	140
4. Fascinating Francis: A Preposterous History	191
Conclusion	230
Plates	240
Bibliography	242

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Abstract

Is there such a thing as *essential Irishness*, something which can be encountered, on the one hand, as affect, and standardised on the other by political economy? A considerable number of artists, writers, theorists, critics, and citizens think so – even if they do not always phrase it in this way – and ‘Sacred Weather’ takes this possibility seriously. It also presents this possibility literally, in the sense of proposing an objective correlation for national feeling in national *Stimmung*, configured here as what Gayatri Spivak has called a ‘strategic essentialism’ in the rhetorical economy of postcolonial nationalism.

All ideological edifices, including nationalism, require a measure of affection to appeal to the would-be national subject: such a reliance on enjoyment leaves this edifice vulnerable to both the excessive play of enjoyment as a force which evades stable signification, and, paradoxically, to the ossification of affectionate identification as kitsch. Atmospheric essentialism is imagined literally as meteorology and metonymically as that which presents in cultural production as ‘ambient poetics’; *Stimmung* as affective and enjoyable encounter. *Jouissance*, or pure enjoyment, is the site of the decoupling of affect and ideology, and I am interested in exploiting this moment of decomposition, wherein the undertow of affection licensing an ideological position develops in excess of it. This theoretical position is outlined in Chapter One.

With this project, I propose to make a persuasive intervention in Irish literary and cultural studies by analysing the work of the novelist John McGahern (1934-2006) as it reacts with this libidinal investment in aesthetic Irishness. Subsequent chapters stage experimentally ambient and psycho-analytic readings of McGahern’s work to this end.



ntroduction

Is there such a thing as *essential Irishness*, something which can be encountered, on the one hand, as affect, and standardised on the other by political economy? A considerable number of artists, writers, theorists, critics, and citizens think so – even if they do not always phrase it in this way – and ‘Sacred Weather’ begins by taking this possibility seriously. It also presents this possibility *literally*, in the sense of proposing an objective correlation for national feeling in national *Stimmung*, configured here as what Gayatri Spivak has called a ‘strategic essentialism’ in the rhetorical economy of postcolonial nationalism. With this project, I propose to make a persuasive intervention in Irish literary and cultural studies by analysing the work of the novelist John McGahern (1934-2006) as it reacts with this libidinal investment in ambient Irishness, commencing with a chapter that will account for its theoretical basics, and continuing with three close studies of its extension in McGahern’s work.

It is helpful to present a caveat here. McGahern is not, or at least not only, the main concern of this dissertation. What began as a prosaically Heideggerian reading of ‘dwelling’ in the work of this significant Irish author evolved, over the course of my research, into something quite different: a project in which the necessity of outlining and endorsing a theoretical position finally outweighed its single-author emphasis. This is not to say that McGahern ever became *irrelevant*; on the contrary, the first forages into *sinthomes* and *jouissance* came about through investigation of the ‘ecomimetic’ effects of his later works, whilst, perhaps more importantly, the political or polemical thrust of this project – its response to a call for a revised relationality which

would appreciate affiliation but refuse to ‘retool’ exclusive notions of authenticity – has been developed in response to the questions of history and otherness posed by McGahern’s writing. For these reasons McGahern’s work remains the main vehicle of my argument, even if its terms extend beyond McGahern and are shaped by ideas which seem, at first, incompatible with it. At the same time, while McGahern’s work complements my theoretical projections and has provided a productive locus for experimentation, it would be inaccurate to say that my dissertation constitutes a deep and consistent analysis of his career: in the first, too much space needs to be given over to the explanation of theoretical precedents and positions, and, in the second, processing all of the writer’s output through a conceptual lens which only illuminates (if acutely) aspects of it would be counterproductive. The reader may find that my McGahern differs from that of Irish literary culture, or from existing academic analyses of his work, and this is partly owing to the ‘preposterous’ history I am pursuing in lieu of a more traditional one.

My work responds to a question posed by Conor Carville’s *The Ends of Ireland* (2011), a survey and critique of existing frames of analysis within cultural studies. In this, Carville points to a failure to conceive of Irishness beyond identity politics, and asks, ‘can contemporary cultural criticism evolve a theory of the subject which does more than merely retool familiar ideas of authenticity and identity, and yet still retain a sense of the affective power of affiliation, the role of culture in the articulation of difference?’¹ I am more interested in the expansive capacity of *decentred selfhood* than the stable or socialised figure Carville is writing of here, but, in spite of this, his question-cum-mission statement might well be my own. In particular, theories of the subject, or rather of a representative Irish subjectivity, are considered here as something conditioned in the encounter between ideology and enjoyment; which is to say, *affectively*. A parallel consideration of the excessive capacities of affect will raise questions of if, and how, this image of subjectivity might be then be productively revised.

A key difference between my approach and that of Carville is my particular focus on atmosphere. This reflects the fact that this essentialism most dynamically mediates Irishness in McGahern's work, but also presents a phenomenological adjunct to subjecthood which manifests as a series of traces received as affective impressions. These are the material leavings of ideological investments, and their objectal persistence is comparable to Timothy Morton's theory of 'dark ecology', an ethical orientation toward otherness in nature. I call this 'the poetics of peatsmoke', a modified version of Morton's 'poetics of spice', and emphasise its excremental qualities: it is imagined as a kind of material/emotional effluence liberated from ideological proscription and experienced, in many cases, as waste. I have borrowed the term, of course, from John Eglinton's comment on the Celtophile Haines in Joyce's *Ulysses*: as the Englishman hastens to purchase a copy of *The Love Songs of Connaught*, it is remarked that 'the peatsmoke has gone to his head', like, perhaps, a duller variant on those opium reveries which produced such works of Romantic orientalism as 'Kubla Khan'.² Where I employ this term here it is not always metaphorical – it is represented, for instance, by the crude thingliness of commodity kitsch – nor necessarily abject, but it is always subject to the ambivalent ontological status of *jouissance*, a pleasure which can also be painful, and which does not adhere to the value-projections of political economy. It is not so much Ireland as *Irishness*, *Geist* made corporeal through strategic essentialism, and the concepts of place and emplacement are crucial to it.

John Wilson Foster voices suspicion of place, in Irish writing, as 'evidence of a subjectivity [the writer] is unable or unwilling to transcend' for reasons which may relate to the legacy of displacement that has been characteristic of global modernity and realised, in Ireland, through evolutions in land organisation marked by an anxious relation to capital.³ The pedagogy of place may therefore function as a negation of displacement, or as 'a form of Romanticism: countering the displacements of modernity with the politics and poetics of place', but succeeding only on a fantasy level.⁴ Where McGahern is concerned, interpretations of his work

as *localist* have tended towards a conservative, and at times politically motivated, reading of ‘postage-stamp Leitrim’ as a ‘whole world’ whose coordinates are not open to interrogation; such annotations are the result of critical consensus and not inherent in the writing itself, reflecting instead the kind of McGahern modern Ireland has produced for itself.

There is, however, another way of reading place-hood and atmospheric essentialism – one which responds to the impositions of political economy. This reading attends to the production of space *by* capitalism, as, sequentially speaking, potential ‘plots’, going concerns, and post-productive wastelands; a process of *processing* which irreversibly reshapes and inscribes landscape much like biopolitics irreversibly revises bodies as stock. There has not been a sufficient sense of this in Irish Studies, and as such post-Revivalist investments in the authentic receptacle of the west fail repeatedly to account for the west of Ireland, and for all areas sharing in its underdevelopment, as spatial waste. It is worth quoting Morton at length on this subject, if only so that its prescience to the Irish context is evident:

“Empty” space – space that capitalism has left relatively underdeveloped – is intrinsic to capitalism, since the laws of capital may dictate that a vacant lot is more profitable over a certain span of time than one that has been developed. *Plot* is a potential space, a limbo waiting to generate value. Capitalism moves onto this empty stage, with its phantasmagoric carnival, leaving junkspace in its wake. Consider the idea of a ghost town. The leavings of capital have a haunting quality [...] a certain erasure and silence is evident, a heaviness like Levinas’s *there is*, or a Raymond Chandleresque sense of atmosphere as *clue*.⁵

In the context of Irish scholarship we might point, rather, to a David Lloyd-esque preoccupation with atmosphere as residual proof of economic, biopolitical, and infrastructural violence – this,

in a strongly ambient sense which, like Morton, makes use of the trace and of Derridean spectrality, is conspicuous in a work like ‘The Indigent Sublime’ (2005). Even in Lloyd’s commentary, however, that which remains is a kernel of authentic and ancient recalcitrance – not, as Morton constructs it here, the material equivalent of white noise. This latter ‘abstract value’ will be analysed, in this project, as a spectral sign for an absent signified; what Colin Graham describes as a citational ‘Ireland’, ‘a limbo waiting to generate value’. This ‘space’, or affective event or impression, which can be decanted into representative abstractions, constitutes a related but divergent variant on atmospheric essentialism – one which, instead of promising authenticity, rather articulates a spurious or suspended concession to *ina*uthenticity; to what Graham described as a ‘haunting, aporetic’ Ireland metonymised by ‘an excessive, replicating plenitude’ of hollow sign.⁶ It might be represented by the colour green, for example, or for adjacent and equally alienated essentialisms like music or reproduced and disseminated vernacular habits and artefacts. It challenges the notion of a local origin even as it symbolises attachment, affiliation, and, moreover, *embodied* presence in Ireland or in the midst of Irishness.

For Morton, this quality of *distance* is inseparable, from a materialist perspective, from imperialist geography, and the fetishising of remote but potentially productive space on a global scale:

The very form of alienation, the commodity, gave the first inklings of global environmental awareness in a poetic mode I have elsewhere described as “the poetics of spice.” In this early form of advertising language, global flows of trade are represented as flows of spicy odor towards the nose of the consumer, in a form of ekphrasis (vivid description) that is often deeply ambient.⁷

Neither Morton's *Ecology without Nature* (2007) nor *The Poetics of Spice* (2000) go into detail about colonial Ireland's implication in this sensual economy, except to mention the potato famine as an example of an unfeasible ecosystem developed in the interests of imperialist trade. I am, however, interested in the synthetic suggestiveness of the ambient trace – let us think of this as the most opaque, effervescent, and quasi-substantial element of signification, a *chemical property* – as it persists in cultural production. 'The Irish Imagination', to go by Brian O'Doherty's introduction to the 1971 exhibition, is made present through such mystical, evasive, and crepuscular effects:

The landscape and the Irish light – with its long twilights – affected [its] [mid-century] art deeply. Its atmosphere is characterized by a mythical rather than a historical sense, an uneasy and restless fix on the unimportant, and a reluctance to disclose anything about what is painted, let alone to make a positive statement about it [...] a natural outgrowth of an isolation that encouraged introspection.⁸

Peatsmoke, it seems, has gone to everybody's head. It is easy to ridicule this. Tom Duddy's riposte, 'Irish Art Criticism – a Provincialism of the Right?', does not dispute the 'muddily mystical' tone of Irish painting at this time so much as the logic of its origins: for him, this ideological commitment to nativism, to 'geography, landscape, and weather' over 'history and economic realities' is, in fact, a casualty of market demand, which originates outside of Ireland (*advertising language* once again). The ornery aboriginality O'Doherty celebrates does not generate established signs for Irishness so much as rehash or reproduce them, as supplements whose formal aspects have been fomented in the zone of exchange attained between local and global capital. Their metonymic capacities reveal a deep, if familiar and somewhat hackneyed, ecology of associations – Irishness *as* mystical, insular, romantic, irrational – which Duddy, waggishly and in sympathy with my interests here, calls 'meteorological eroticism'.⁹

Ambient poetics can be more, or less, sophisticated than this, and my examples in Chapter One run the gamut from Joyce to kitsch in the interest of elaborating on one of the ideological justifications behind the poetics of peatsmoke. This is *atmospheric essentialism*, a strategic essentialism tied to what Homi Babha accounts for as an investment in national environment as ‘the inscape of national identity’ – a figure or fetish which ‘emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression’.¹⁰ Its rhetorical power is contingent on libidinal investment in an agglutination of signs which are voluminous, dimensional, and phenomenally textured. Its very dynamism may, as I will argue, be the force which liberates it from symbolic or political proscription; at the same time, it is important to emphasise that *alienation* forms part of the poetics of peatsmoke and its appeal. Ambient poetics fetish emptiness and, in a way, reproduce the uncanny volatility of the *autonomous* atmosphere, giving rise, variously, to the haunted landscape, the enchanted landscape – or the free hand of capital. An uncanny combination of *alienation* and *implication* is the defining characteristic of atmospheric essentialism.

Morton defines ambient poetics itself as ‘a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription’, which includes ‘the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader’. In common with many of the reflexes of Irish nationalism, it originates in ‘the poetics of sensibility out of which Romanticism emerged in the late eighteenth century’.¹¹ Morton’s study catalogues a large number of cultural products and tendencies under this, including contemporary trance music, Romantic poetry, environmentalist writing, ‘found’ art, and the attuned realities of intoxication or stimulants. He also nationalises this occasionally, pointing to the transcendently ambient autonomy of rural Englishness in a poem like ‘Adlestrop’, or to the environmental ecstasy and inclusivity of Walt Whitman, but does not – naturally, given his subject matter – conceive of an Irish version of this, or of any postcolonial manifestation of national ambience (it is very much a

conceit of the centre). The potential of this position to be adapted to the Irish context is rich, and, although I have not had space to do justice to it here, some examples do feature: the sinthomatic thrill of a Disney banshee, the spatialised nature of schizophrenia in Nancy Scheper-Hughes, or the symbolic ubiquity of the colour green. In a significant way, we are thinking of an Irish mode of consumption of the self *as* other, or as exotic, or ‘auto-exoticised’, but this should not carry any sense of judgment, since this is also the most visible means of *performing* or *inhabiting* Irishness, and its enmeshment in proto-advertising language is a casualty of colonialism. Graham’s *Deconstructing Ireland* (2001), with which I am frequently in dialogue here, captures something of the ethical conundrums which emerge from a postmodern knowledge of national symbols as temporary or artificial, and with nationalism as a strategy which, in Ireland at least, pervades quotidian life and relations to a pronounced degree. Arguably, the stripping of ideology – the rending of the veil, the revelation of some superior truth – does not necessarily preserve us *against* ideology. In the Irish context, this has particular significance in relation to the transcendently European impulses of post-nationalism; impulses which, as Chapter One will briefly explore, hitch Irishness to the racialised ideological presuppositions of Europeanism whilst implicitly insisting that this is constructed from *no ideology at all*: that Irishness is, finally, normal and enlightened, or authentic, no longer strategically essentialised against Englishness or modernity or everyone else in the West. I am interested in the semantic vacuum this creates, when former vehicles for national essentialism become detrital or obscure, but remain phenomenologically palpable. This is not only space-as-waste, nor even Ireland-as-waste, but certain aspects of *Irishness* as waste, as a dialectically negative trace.

Morton identifies six salient features of ambient poetics – rendering, the medial, the timbral, the Aeolian, tone, and the re-mark – and the last of these, the most significant, is a Derridean figure of significance to this dissertation, since it functions, broadly speaking, as a sign for the conversion of matter *into* signs, symbols, and legible systems; ‘a special mark (or series of

them) that makes us aware that we are in the presence of (significant) marks'.¹² This is a *signal for context* not reducible to the particular terms of that context, as a frame both within and without the artwork, or a mark doubled back on itself as a sign for the system it belongs to. Morton seizes on the re-mark as an indispensable obligation of ambient poetics in modern art; a *Gestalt* distinction between figure and ground which can only be encountered as figure *or* ground, but which aspires to either collapse this distinction or to make a claim for something 'in between'. The 'faces and candlesticks' illusion of *Gestalt* imagery is an example of this; the 'guaranteed Irish' logo, which I have used in the title to this Introduction, is another. Here, its symbolic consubstantiality operates, quite appropriately, as a brand.

The title of this dissertation, 'Sacred Weather', is intended to both suggest the charged materiality of atmospheric matter I have described above, and also to reference McGahern, who uses the term when discussing the religious atmosphere of his youth:

In school I taught the catechism and led the children in the obligatory prayers with the same ease as when I believed. I had affection still and gratitude for my upbringing in the Church: it was the sacred weather of my early life, and I could no more turn against it than I could turn on any deep part of my life.¹³

'Sacred weather', or the sacralised environment of a totalising place-world – where 'place-world', a term I have borrowed from Edward Casey, indicates a limited locale, the structural centre of which is the embodied subject – charges the early, eidetic world of childhood with meaning:

My early grammar was made up of images. The first image was the sky [...] Heaven was in the sky, and beyond its mansions was the Garden of Paradise. House of Gold, Ark of the Covenant, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star were prayed

to each night. One of my earliest memories is of looking up at the steep, poor rushy hill that rose behind our house and thinking that if I could climb the hill I would be able to step into the very middle of the sky and walk to the stars and to the very gate of heaven.¹⁴

This place-world is a baroque one; that its contours are so excessively saturated with meaning as to veer towards the banal does not necessarily challenge this fact. Its impossible surplus is almost metaphysical. That the adult McGahern claims to avoid organised religious observances may indicate an awareness of the unsustainability of such intense devotional concepts as the transubstantiating ‘ark’ and ‘house’ of the Virgin Mary’s celestial body; it is also significant, as Chapter Two seeks to explain, that this almost autonomous force for sacred laterality – the proliferative logic of the litany or list, or of the compulsive chanting associated especially with meditative devotional practices such as the rosary – is associated, in the writer’s later works, with the figure of his mother, Susan McGahern. ‘John McGahern was nine and a half years old when his mother died’, Dermot McCarthy explains plainly. ‘The little boy was very close to her. Later, when he came to write about her in his fiction, he would describe her as ‘beloved’ [...], and at the end of his career, in a memoir, he would acknowledge her place at the heart of his whole imaginative life’.¹⁵ These sentences summarise some of the most upsetting sequences of *Memoir* (2005), and gesture towards the charged role played by such ambient mechanics as repetition, the refrain, reminiscence, and the attempted restoration of a ‘lost world’ in the context of an *oeuvre* preoccupied with ‘rituals and ceremonies’, both religious and secular, that persist ‘as an inheritance, an orientation that [underlays] all later forms of knowledge [and is] associated primarily with his mother’s faith and his memories of her’.¹⁶

Ambient poetics or *ecomimesis* is a pronounced feature of McGahern’s late career. For this reason, I am beginning with the two most recent works, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002)

and *Memoir*, both of which break with the more pessimistic texture of works like *The Barracks* (1963) and *The Dark* (1965), and even with the existentialist ‘middle’ novels *The Leavetaking* (1974) and *The Pornographer* (1979); as ‘rural elegies’, the last two novels are most in sympathy with *Amongst Women* (1991). Dennis Sampson has described the creatively autobiographical *Memoir* as ‘the work of a poet in prose’¹⁷, and we might also imagine the opening lines of the writer’s final work of fiction as decanted into verse:

The morning was clear. There was no wind on the lake. There was also a great stillness. When the bells rang out for mass, the strokes trembling on the water, they had the entire world to themselves.¹⁸

This style of literary presentation, a ‘condition of simple witness’ founded on measured and comprehensible sentences, characterises the language of *Rising Sun* but does not prevent the work from taking on poetic qualities; from the generation of effects which are more pronounced than narrative propulsion.¹⁹ The most significant outcome of this is its establishment of an immersive milieu: a textual ‘space’ or affective locality is generated by a number of mechanical features, and conveyed in what Derek Attridge has called ‘the creative act of comprehension’ as it is both programmed in advance by the text and experienced by the reading subject.²⁰ As this effect extends into *Memoir* it is also reflected through this work’s use of repetition – *Memoir* ‘remembers’, or perhaps metabolises, much of McGahern’s written career, effecting a kind of knowable fold or zone of affinity. In both *Rising Sun* and *Memoir*, this association is especially relevant to the ‘uncanny’ recurrence of Susan as a presiding spirit; as a sign for the ‘lost world’ of hermetic holism lost to death, displacement, or cultural change.

The affective locale of the ambient text should be marked as distinct from localism. The latter has been placed at centre of McGahern’s aesthetic most emphatically by Eamon Maher,

who insists on the significance of McGahern's portraits of rural Leitrim as essentially mimetic, restorative, and conservative; these communities, 'brought to refinement by the conditions of an unchanging reality over many days and generations', are, in Maher's analysis, both wholly 'knowable' and judged approvingly for their apparent pastoralism.²¹ In many ways *Memoir* is to blame for this retrospective reimagining of McGahern's subject matter as historically authentic. When Thomas McGonigle asks if McGahern, with *Memoir*, 'has ruined his reputation and the desire of readers ever to seek out the novels that give him his place in the world' now that it is apparent 'that what we credited solely to McGahern's art draws much from his own life', he underestimates the degree to which some readers are willing to over-embrace biography.²² For Declan Kiberd, the writer's late popularity in Ireland is actually a response to the generational representativeness of his writing as it encourages a sense that 'in some way the history of [readers'] own families have been told with a kind of tenderness and honesty and a mixture of wistfulness and longing, that is appropriate to the dignity of the experience'.²³ This investment in historical veracity is problematic, because it devalues the artistic interface which mediates McGahern's 'life' as art, and this may be the key to McGonigle's distaste: *Memoir*, the latter explains, 'fills me with awful feelings of powerless identification with McGahern' – with an involuntary obligation, perhaps, to re-experience a difficult childhood vicariously.

That Kiberd and Maher's Irish readers detect 'dignity' rather than powerlessness is an indication of the different ways in which McGahern's depictions of family life, rural decline, and intimate violence can be received. It also suggests the division in the 'Susans' we extract and contextualise from his work. There is, in the first, the historical figure of Susan McGahern, whose premature death places her in a nexus of personal and political discourses surrounding the treatment of women in post-independence Ireland; there is also the Susan of literary readings like McCarthy's *John McGahern and the Art of Memory* (2010), a symbol for succour and feminine passivity whose implication in any possible history is obscured by her artistic function. Neither of

these readings are wrong, but, while the first is perhaps too blunt in its execution, the second should be challenged for its pastoralism, which potentially contributes to the obscuring of minor perspectives in ‘official’ interpretations of McGahern as ‘local property’: as a writer who, as Belinda McKeon explains, ‘wrote stories about ordinary life, about ordinary places and people, as familiar as Sliabh an Iarainn against the Leitrim sky’.²⁴ The implications of ordinariness are political. McGahern’s position as a realist annotator of life in what Joe Cleary has shortened to ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ – a discursive category rather than an actual, historical, epoch – is increasingly assured, and his ‘official’ personality, as well as the authority of identity this bestows, constitute interpretative arbitrations which often seek to concretise a conservative vision of history.²⁵ This vision elides the subject of social or political injustice more often than it contends with these; often, in the case of commentary on McGahern, under the guise of an apparent anti-elitism. The journalist Aubrey Malone remarks that ‘[when] a writer becomes the property of the literati, especially one so unsuited to critical exegesis as this beautifully simple writer, a kind of hermeneutical gravedigging takes place that adds little to the meaning of the books but subtracts a lot from them’: he then goes on, however, to establish the authority of his own position by referring to personal discussions with McGahern, drawing on another kind of ‘gravedigging’.²⁶ McKeon expresses concern that such approaches foreclose on considerations of the writer’s literary skill; I would suggest that it also discloses a political position in which relational obligations are static. To challenge this is to challenge consensus in his reception but not, I would argue, to read against the grain of the texts themselves.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion which are similarly concerned with the broader outline of my theoretical proposition, and followed by a small number of colour plates depicting the works of visual art referred to as examples or comparisons in the body of the project. The substance, limits, and extension of atmospheric essentialism are laid out in Chapter One, whilst Chapter Two deals with the ambient

poetics of McGahern's late works from an essentially formalist perspective and makes additional use of analytical apparatuses drawn from art theory. This interest in art and the visual, which finds its justification in McGahern's own short essay on literary technique 'The Image', is further deployed to the ends of a 'preposterous' degree of hermeneutical 'gravedigging'. I have borrowed the term *preposterous history* from Mieke Bal, who uses it to license a certain departure from chronology, and attention to the traffic in influence, citation, and sympathy between artworks produced in different periods; in my case, I am additionally adequating it to the task of an intermedial reading of writing and visual art. Chapter Three proposes a simultaneous analysis of what I am calling the *politics of prostration*, of an intersection between figural composition and bodily hexis, in the opening scene of McGahern's second novel *The Dark*. The motive behind this particular reading is a political one, which aims to draw attention to the biopolitical exigency of exclusion and negation at work in some contemporary manifestations of official or national atonement for the phenomenon of child abuse in Irish institutions. Chapter Four, the final chapter, resumes an interest in composition and cultural symbolism and extends this into a (still more) preposterous reading of the near-totemic figure of Francis McGahern, the writer's father, in his work. I place this alongside what I feel to be the similarly static and potent figure presented by what Enda Duffy has called 'native spectacle', and Francis is, as a result, analysed under the remit of the *sinthome*, via the lens of visual or scopic 'gridding' supplied by visual art, and between two comparable figures for native spectacle – the insurrectionary nationalist Patrick Pearse and the subject of Billy Quinn's photographic installation, *Quinn's Da* (1998). The colour plates are included for readerly convenience, since, while visual art is not the subject of this dissertation, particular works have proved helpful in explaining ambient poetics; their inclusion also indicates something of the cross-disciplinary mobility of atmospheric essentialism as a concept.

It is, then, between ambient poetics and visual art that I locate 'the poetics of peatsmoke' in McGahern's work, expanding this concept to include ambient impulses like ekphrasis, nature

description, and attuned atmosphere, but also the ecology of degraded symbols – the *chemical trace*, that is, detected in what might be described as a semiotic interregnum inaugurated by *jouissance*. This is better accounted for through recourse to the *sinthome* in Chapter One, which defines and explains the significance of this Lacanian figure to the intersection of proscription and enjoyment represented by the ideological edifice of nationalism, and coalesced in its ‘objectal’ or symbolic emissaries and symptoms – signs for the nation, signs for national space, and ambient techniques of national representation.

There is, at least tentatively, an ethical program underpinning this. Strategic atmospheric essentialism is contingent, like all externalised signs for the nation, on the ‘substance’ of enjoyment, meaning that it is open to hardening into a *sinthome* – for example, as kitsch – and undermining, or dissolving, the authoritative holism of the nation itself. The ethical value of this lies not in the exposure of nationalism as contingent, but in the recognition that the affective encounters which engender national sentiment also work, as events of *jouissance*, to draw attention to a bodily and intimate capacity for affective solidarity athwart the proscriptions of political economy; a state, to quote Leo Bersani, of ‘pure relationality’.²⁷ This is the particular ground upon which my argument responds to the challenge raised by Carville; the call to rethink the value of culture in articulating difference, against the reduction of culture to a homogenising force for organised essentialism. I conceive of atmospheric essentialism as one form of strategic essentialism which has occurred, and continues to occur (in the sense of retaining consensus as to its ontological validity) in the life of the nation; it is detectable and identifiable, using the tools supplied by ambient poetics, in a variety of cultural products, but *not always re-marked as explicitly national*. This is because it is not reducible to nationality, or at least to any stable interpretation of this allegiance. While such irreducibility does not efface or reverse the effects of essentialism in the construction of subject-positions negotiated by participants in the nation, it does express something of the capacity for the materiality of a national symbolic regime to deconstruct its

assigned meanings, to produce new meanings, or to gesture towards non-meaning. In interview with Maher, McGahern accounted for his own national identity in terms which may set us to think about this:

What's interesting is to be human, to be decent or to be moral or whatever. Everything that we inherit, the rain, the skies, the speech, and anybody who works in the English language in Ireland knows that there's the dead ghost of Gaelic in the language we use and listen to and that those things will reflect our Irish identity. And I actually see it as being very childish for anyone to have to beat their breast and say "I'm Irish!" I mean, isn't it obvious?²⁸

What follows will endeavour to defamiliarise certain elements of the obvious, and, incidentally, to place a degree of peripheral focus on *inheritance* – on affiliation, repetition, and restoration – while remaining intuitively cognisant of the fact that 'the rain, the skies, the speech', three of the most significant components of atmospheric essentialism, are phenomenological figures whose medial Irishness could furnish dissertations in their own right. In an important way, that which they contribute to atmospheric essentialism in unison is a form of *banality*: an investment made alienated, but available for reclamation through agitation by critical thought.

¹ Conor Carville, *The Ends of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 2.

² James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 238.

³ John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1991), p. 31.

⁴ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 172.

⁵ Ibid, p. 86.

⁶ Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 6.

⁷ *Ecology without Nature*, p. 93.

⁸ Brian O'Doherty, 'The Irish Imagination, 1959-1971', *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader*, ed. Fintan Cullen (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), pp. 268-272 [p. 269].

⁹ Tom Duddy, 'Irish Art Criticism – A Provincialism of the Right?' *Sources in Irish Art*, pp. 91-99 [pp. 91, 93].

¹⁰ Homi K. Babha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Babha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-318 [p. 295].

¹¹ *Ecology without Nature*, p. 3.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 48.

¹³ John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 222.

¹⁴ McGahern, 'The Church and Its Spire', *Love of the World: Collected Essays*, ed. Stanley Van der Ziel (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), pp. 133-148 [pp. 134-135].

¹⁵ Dermot McCarthy, *John McGahern and the Art of Memory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 1.

¹⁶ Dennis Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, ix.

¹⁸ McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 1.

¹⁹ Eamon Grennan, 'Only What Happens: Mulling over McGahern', *Irish University Review*, 35.1 (2005), pp. 13-27 [p. 14].

²⁰ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 91.

²¹ McGahern, 'What Is My Language?' *Love of the World*, pp. 260-274 (p. 272).

²² Thomas McGonigle, 'The Story of His Life', *Los Angeles Times* 26 February 2006.

²³ Quoted in Eamon Maher, 'John McGahern and His Irish Readers', *New Hibernia Review* 9.2 (Summer, 2005), pp. 125-136 [p. 125].

²⁴ Belinda McKeon, 'Beyond Chronicle: The Deceptive Realism of John McGahern's Fiction', *American Journal of Irish Studies* 8 (2011), pp. 77-92 [p. 81].

²⁵ Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2007), p. 9.

²⁶ Aubrey Malone, 'John McGahern: Critical Essays', *Books Ireland* (September/October 2014), pp. 13-14 [p. 13].

²⁷ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, 'Beauty's Light', *October* 82 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 17-29 [p. 22].

²⁸ In interview with Eamon Maher, 'Catholicism and National Identity in the Works of John McGahern', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 90.357 (Spring, 2001), pp. 72-83 [p. 76].

Being Green:

Atmospheric Essentialism in Irish Culture

Fellow rebels, when coming from Dublin today, one thing I noticed was the Republican colours everywhere I looked. I saw the yellow cornfields, green fields, and white cloud; yellow green and white, the Sinn Féin colours.

(Constance de Markievicz)¹

Introduction

At the heart of Timothy Morton's analysis in *Ecology without Nature*, a work which has profoundly influenced my theoretical program here, is a regard for Theodor Adorno's ethical take on dialectics:

Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking [...] What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity: as long as its demand for totality will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it.²

This project is not a straightforwardly dialectical one, and I am not as explicitly committed to Adorno as Morton is, but this sentiment resurfaces repeatedly in my chosen definitions of, and critical dispositions towards, ideology, enjoyment, and national [non]identity. In this chapter, for instance, I propose an intersectional interpretation of *jouissance* as that which suspends selfhood and distends a ‘moment of dissolution’ which, through ephemeral, works against that reversion to the same Maurice Blanchot identified as a false diversification of the world. This dissolution is a form of dialectical negativity which cannot be reconciled to the logical unity of the totalising mind, or the totalising ‘selfhood’ presented by socialised identity and critiqued here as a source of symbolic violence.³ That which Carville identifies as problematic in Irish Studies – a reflexive reversion to ‘authentic’ identity – may be read as a similar insistence on the total and unified, albeit one which begins, paradoxically, by making a claim for differentiation. I would also like to flag Adorno’s allusion to *guilt*. There is a surprising amount of guilt, shame, or embarrassment bound up with the mobilisation of atmospheric essentialism in Irish culture; in what follows, this will be occasionally and indirectly evident, but it finds its most obvious expression in encounters with the kitsch.

Consider the following objection, from the McGahern scholar and author Belinda McKeon, to certain constructions of this writer within and without Ireland:

The rush, in the months after his death, to claim McGahern for [the] “ordinary world”, to downplay his artistic achievement in favour of praising his unpretentiousness, as though these two things were incompatible, may have been enacted chiefly out of fondness and out of sadness at his passing – out of a sense of McGahern as a “character,” as a local personality. But such a response becomes potentially damaging when it begins to harden into consensus [...] McGahern is vastly underrated in the United States as a writer of literary fiction –

this is the writer described as the most important Irish novelist since Samuel Beckett, after all, and yet mention his name on a MFA program here, or to the editor of a literary journal, and you are likely to get a mixture of the responses received when colleagues here were told of his death: total blankness, a confusion with Frank McCourt, or the vaguest of recognitions, and a remark about Irish writers and their continuing obsession with the land, or family, or misery.⁴

Land, family, misery: rain, skies, speech. McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* extends this metonymic list to include a number of other essentially Irish privations and quirks, concluding with the *Deus ex machina* of emigration to the United States. The three degrees of incomprehension met by McKeon – indifference, misrecognition, and stereotype – resemble, in less pronounced form, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called the 'shame of refused return': this is the 'painful individuation' of a refusal, on behalf of the authoritative other, to recognise the subject as the subject would wish to recognise herself; a failure of *affiliation*.⁵ When postmodern wisdom disdains national pride it misunderstands the nature of this pride, which does not always have to be triumphalist. In the case above, in which misrecognition of McGahern equates to misrecognition of Irish identity as invisible, grotesque, or stereotypical, pride would simply be that which resolves the shame of refused return – which recognises the subject as she would wish to be recognised. This partly explains the subsequent need to reshape McGahern's reception and insist on a more sophisticated mode of approach: the opposite of this, *refused return*, causes the subject to fall back on a sudden awareness of its own contingency, which is to say the contingency of identity and the risk of exposure to non-identity, or to misidentification.

This may seem a result of over-reading, since McKeon is not making a distinction between identity and non-identity, but between one form of Irish identity (negatively stereotypical) and another (intellectually sophisticated); non-identity, however, resides between

these two, and the frustration at being seen in a certain way approximates, through refused return, both non-identity *and* the reliance of identity on constructive confirmation by the other. Both of these draw attention, in short, to the vulnerability of national identity – its vulnerability to co-option, its vulnerability to dissolution. This movement between proscription and dissolution will be significant here, and it is, of course, a variant on the dialectical slide between identity and ‘nonidentity’, between recognition and misrecognition, or denial: ‘[in] the developmental process’, Sedgwick explains, ‘shame is now often considered the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop [...], [meaning] not at all that it is the place where identity is most securely attached to essences, but rather it is the place where the question of identity arises most originally and most relationally’.⁶ This is a site of potential, and especially of potential *relationality*; a site for the deconstruction and reconstruction of identity as an arbitration which excludes, which is not inherent, which can be given or taken away. Think of McGahern’s *obviousness*: what if this obviousness was no longer recognised?

Dialectical thinking doesn’t advocate one identity over another, and would not endorse McKeon’s shift from McCourtian Irishness to Beckettian Irishness, but is located instead in the productively painful moment of non-return, of pure relationality, of isolation and potential – of *jouissance*. If shame inspires a flight from one identity (chauvinism) to another (cosmopolitanism), the moment of potential occurs in the interregnum and not at either pole. Richard Kirkland has theorised ‘the disruptive energies of the interregnum in social relations’ as a force for positive destabilisation and potential in the culture of Northern Ireland; my use of the term is similar, but different, referring most locally to an embodied state of ‘being’ or, rather, ‘being-towards’ – an orientation towards pure relationality.⁷ What follows will seek out or initiate instance of symbolic decomposition which, because they are implicated in atmospheric essentialism, interpolate the body and locate this suspension or dissimulation in the intimate self, where it occurs as *affect*. Affect is an increasingly popular figure in critical theory because its operations are non-directive

and spontaneous, but this should not mean that it is interpreted as utopian: affect retains its ambivalence and apparent autonomy, and, as such, is perhaps only useful for deconstructing political positions. In the case of this dissertation, attention to affect helps explain or expose the ways in which ideology is enjoyable, but such a revelation does not preserve us against ideology, and we can't (or won't) surrender pleasure either. The aim, then, is to show that it is the *insertion* of the body into the fantasy space of ideology which makes ideology work; it is our pleasure which sustains it. State capitalism actually helps to accelerate the degree to which this becomes – as it must – alienated, such that, *pace* Negri, the site of original value (my body, politicised) becomes detached from its ideological justification (my biopolitical status as citizen) and creates conditions conducive to the free play of affect or *jouissance* beyond ideology. This sounds pastoral but it is in fact intended, in the simplest sense, to be idiotic: after all, in the case of the ambient *sinthome*, or symptomatic material expression, pastoralism and idiocy are the same thing.

1.1 *Jouissance*

In this opening chapter, *jouissance* is theorised in relation to the ideological proscription of nationalism and the undertow of affection which is necessary to sustain it, but which is also in excess of symbolic mediation. Such excess potentially revises *jouissance* as capable of subverting or transcending the intentional program of the ideology it supports, and this, broadly speaking, is the position adopted by Bersani and Antonio Negri. By contrast, that which Slavoj Žižek and Timothy Morton detect in *jouissance* is the symptomatic proof of ideological enmeshment, as registered by the Lacanian figure of the *sinthome*. In Morton's analysis ambience is a *sinthome* in itself – while, in Lacan, it generally refers to 'an objectal substance', Morton's inversion imagines the *sinthome* 'not as figure but as ground: a potent, non-neutral ground, a giant stain [...] a wound that is also a *space*'.⁸ *Jouissance* underpins this because it is the binding agent through which the

subject takes her pleasure in proscription, a force which I, through Negri, will track as it expands to transcend or menace proscription through, paradoxically, the forces of alienation. Gayatri Spivak has defined strategic essentialism as the ‘strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest’, and Conor Carville re-emphasises the *visible* quality of this, drawing attention to its phenomenological status.⁹ It is inherently self-alienating, sublimating the individual to the collective claims of standardised affect; in this way, it also compellingly echoes the alienated excesses of the kitsch.

All ideological edifices, including nationalism, require a measure of affection or otherwise *affective* investment to appeal to the would-be national subject: such a reliance on enjoyment leaves this edifice vulnerable to both the excessive play of enjoyment as a force which evades stable signification (self-shattering), and the ossification of affectionate identification as kitsch (*shintome*). It is important, first, to say that terms like *atmosphere*, *ambience*, *environment*, and *landscape* are interchangeable here, and intended to simultaneously register and de-familiarise the symbolic category of ‘Irish landscape’ through its phenomenal correlation in *Stimmung*. The truncated freight of this German word – mood, attunement, tone, music, a Romantic sense of sensual or psychic consubstantiality between self and world – registers, in shorthand, many of the presumptions which underpin ambient poetics. Atmospheric essentialism is imagined most literally as meteorology, and metaphorically or representationally as that which is present in cultural production *as* ambient poetics. *Stimmung* is an *affective encounter* rather than an object, but can be decanted into a product or propaganda, and take on the function of a Lacanian ‘thing’, or *objet petit a*, or object of desire – or, in the writing of Žižek, ‘Nation-thing’.

Negri has theorised affect as a site for productive generation and exchange which is appealing to postmodern political economy precisely because it provokes desire:

Postmodern political economy [recognises] that value is formed in the relation of affect, that affect has fundamental productive qualifications, and so forth. Consequently, political economy attempts to control it, mystify its nature, and limit its control. Political economy must in every case bring productive forces under control, and thus it must organize itself to superimpose over the new figures of valorization (and the new subjects that produce it) new figures of exploitation [...]¹⁰

For my purposes here, one might adequate this thus: nationalist political economy recognises that membership of the nation is formed in the relation of affect; consequently, official nationalism attempts to control it, mystify its nature, and limit its application. Political economy must bring those forces which produce national subjects under control, and thus it must organize itself to superimpose over those figures of valorization (citizens) new figures of exploitation: local, intimate, and familiar affinities swelled to encompass imagined community according to the regulative terms of the latter and developing, as agents of social and biopolitical reproduction, into ‘family cells’, economic units, and human reserve – into, in other words, new and economically productive forms of filiation. This is the logic of the modern nation in the broadest sense, and also of Negri’s economy of affect, but Negri still insists on the recalcitrance of affect to this intentional program and proposes ‘value-affect’ – an updated version of labour-value – as a revised site of relational logic ‘outside’ the structures of value-exchange. This contention, which will be explained below, lies behind my own interest in the capacity for nationalised *jouissance* to transcend the intentional program of nationalism. I intend to articulate this, not through affect (or not *only* through affect) but via the more pessimistically promising figure of the *sinthome*.

Richard Howard, introducing a translation of Roland Barthes *The Pleasure of the Text*, meditates on the implications of the term *jouissance* as a word for orgasm adopted from French

but placed at the end of a conceptual evolution which gives it an Anglophone heritage: “The Bible they translated calls it “knowing” while the Stuarts called it “dying,” the Victorians called it “spending,” and we call it “coming”; a hard look at the horizon of our literary culture suggests that it will not be long before we come to a new word for orgasm proper – we shall call it “being””.¹¹ Howard is writing in 1974; the hour of ‘being’ is now at hand, and this is, in fact, precisely what is meant by *jouissance* when Bersani employs the term, since his formulation of ‘coming’, developed across a number of works, disentangles the subject from the overdetermined relational obligations of socialised identity, engendering a sense of embodied expansiveness and sensation associated with both pre-Oedipal omnipotence and the masochistic ‘shattering’ always attendant upon the transition from pure ‘being’ to socialised self. This is the particular formulation of *jouissance* I am working with here. Nobody can spend their lives *coming*, and Bersani does not suggest that ‘self-shattering’ is a practical pose or critical choice in any sustained way – it is, rather, a force that can disrupt the idea of the subject as something ‘immobile, centred, [and] self-contained’, which can foster a ‘beneficent crisis of selfhood’, and address ‘our most urgent project now: redefining modes of relationality and community, the very notion of sociality’ to militate against the ‘ends’ of identity as a terminus or tyranny.¹² Carville’s call for a renewed sense of the Irish subject which can retain an appreciation for solidarity without conceding to established and exclusive identity positions is similar to this, and I propose to allow these to intersect.

1.2 *The Nation-thing*

At the centre of Carville’s *The Ends of Ireland* is the contention that the relationship between subjectivity and identity is a ‘central, problematic, and often disavowed’ aspect of Irish cultural theory, in no small part because identity requires a libidinal investment to gain and exhibit an

intimate ontological credibility.¹³ Spivak, posing a question which is also an adequate expression of my interests here, interrogates the exchange between imaginative interactions with personal environment, as well as the symbolic revision of this as national affinity, and asks, ‘When and how does the love of mother tongue, the love of my little corner of ground, become the nation thing?’¹⁴

Žižek’s answer to this question identifies the ‘Nation-thing’ as a psychoanalytic category which harnesses those possessive interests normally organised by the phallus, making of the Nation a kind of *objet petit a*, and, moreover, a source of pleasure. ‘The element which holds together a symbolic community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification’, an intellectual choice, because ‘the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward Enjoyment incarnated.’ The ‘so-called set of values that offer support to national identity’, those practices, rituals, and belief systems which mediate essentialism, do not, in themselves, actually organise the Nation as an experience: the Nation-thing is, instead, ‘structured by means of fantasies’ which organise *enjoyment* – organise, that is, an embodied libidinal economy – and construct national identification as ‘an identification sustained by a relationship towards the Nation qua Thing’.¹⁵ I would propose that the thingliness of this Nation-thing is also evident in those instances of opacity engendered by the *sinthome*, and will elaborate on this point presently. The question posed by Spivak, with regards to *how* intimate experience is overcoded as national experience, might be partly explained through recourse to the Nation-thing by tracing the movement of the latter backwards – according to this, the Nation becomes a ‘thing’ inasmuch as it occupies that site of psychic intensity associated with the *objet petit a*, the inaccessible but persistent object of desire; as it invades the realm of mother tongue and ‘my’ corner of ground, the intimate and immediate phenomenological quotidian, *as* a private experience interpreted as conviction. The degree to which my desire for the ‘thing’ is precisely desire for a *Nation*-thing is arbitrated by ideology, or by the force which interprets my felt

orientation towards ‘phantasies’ of connection, relation, and identification as a national affinity which ‘appears to give plenitude and vivacity to [my] way of life, [even though] the only way [I] can determine it is by resorting to different versions of the same empty tautology’ – that of a Nation-thing available only to ‘us’ but delineated as that which is constantly menaced by ‘them’.¹⁶ In this way, for Žižek at least, nationalism is chauvinist because it defines its *objet petit a* as eternally threatened by non-national others, aligning the Nation-thing with the psychic figure of the phallus as it is paradoxically menaced by that which cannot possess it.

We might turn now to an example of a strategic essentialism, presented in Lloyd’s *Anomalous States*. This is the argument that, ‘where the principal organizing metaphor of Irish nationalism [at the outset of its modern, nineteenth-century, inception] is that of a proper paternity, of restoring the lineage of the fathers in order to repossess the motherland’, the ‘defective’ tradition of, in this instance, indigenous and adulterated popular ballads, must be tactically streamlined and sculpted anew; a process which results in the abjection of defective elements, contradictions, exaggerations, and excess in the interest of presenting ‘the homogeneous totality of Irish identity’.¹⁷ This political choice occludes or remains unable to assimilate the heterogeneity of the inchoate or would-be nation itself: ‘Where the colonizer, whose proper slogan should be that ‘Ignorance is Power’, seeks to reduce the colonized to a surveyable surface whose meaning is always the same, and where the nationalist responds with an ideal of the total translucence of national spirit in the people, the hybridized culture of the colonized offers only surfaces pitted or mined with uncertainty’. These pits and mines are a recurrent concern of Lloyd’s criticism, which seeks in several works to argue for a variegated subaltern consciousness suppressed in the interests of ‘an ideal of the total translucence of national spirit’, but potentially retrievable as a kernel of recalcitrance latent in Irish cultural production.¹⁸ A problem with this, as Colin Graham has outlined, is a need to foreclose against any association between this subalternity and the more orthodox, which is to say Gramscian,

image of the subaltern class as aspiring towards a rise to power facilitated by such strategic essentialisms. Lloyd's subalternity is, instead, 'always insurgent' but never hegemonous, which is to say not complicit in the regulatory formations of the state but still essentially homogenous as an entity.¹⁹ It also involves a collapse from strategic essentialism into plain essentialism, since, where the cultural cosmetics of Romantic nationalism may be seen as *strategic*, the atomised but retrievable residues pursued by Lloyd are presented as *authentic*.

Carville detects a similar complicity in Irish configurations of *failure* as an enabling trope – as something which presents itself, in the critical theory of Lloyd and Seamus Deane particularly, as a form of fragmentation available for re-composition as whole. He quotes Deane's preface to the plays of Brian Friel, which posits that Friel's work reflects the 'distorted' psyche of a society inured to failure, '[which] compensates for it by making out of [its] own instability a mode of behaviour in which volatility becomes a virtue. Irish temperament and Irish talk has a deep relationship to Irish desolation and the sense of failure', and objects particularly to the sense that an 'Irish temperament' might be quantifiable.²⁰ Carville also finds such declarations for the inverted value system of a culture conditioned by loss to be misleading in their apparent lability, since most rhetorical routes which take fragmentation or recalcitrance to be hallmarks of Irish subalternity conclude by endorsing a problematically stable construction of subalternity itself.

To bring this in line with Žižek, it is possible to identify both the mendacious totality of official nationalism *and* the residual authenticity of subalternity as alternate aspects of the Nation-thing. What this means is that the phallic *object petit a*, the object of desire which would give 'plenitude and vivacity' to life, which would produce meaning in proportion to the menace of 'them' or 'she', of some other whose desire for the object both underscores its potency and makes visible its vulnerability, remains central to both proposals for identity construction. Although Carville does not make this connection, his expression of frustration at the failure of

‘failure’ to produce a new means of thinking identity in the writings of these critics can, I would contend, be rephrased in this way: as an expression of frustration as an evident inability to stop pursuing the Nation-thing as a stable force for national legitimation. While this section of the current chapter is concerned with accounting for the *jouissance* which results from a libidinal orientation towards the Nation-thing via investment in strategic essentialism, and while the figure of the Nation-thing as phallus should not be overstated here, it is worth engaging with this apparent failure of psychic reasoning in Irish Studies: the final section of this chapter will, then, revisit it, sketching a possible means of *surrendering* phallic plenitude and facing into the abjectly feminised realm of the *sinthome*.

That which makes the national manifestation of the totemic ‘thing’ compelling is, as Spivak suggests, the role of an ‘underived private’, or irreducibly intimate, relation to the territory or the signs for the Nation-thing whose ‘empty tautologies’ do not feel empty because they involve wholly substantial interactions.²¹ Žižek proposes to explain this, too, through Lacan. The nation ‘qua discursive entity-effect’, or the total of its discursive investments as an object of faith with no authentic basis beyond the belief of its subjects, is not compelling enough to account for its potency, ‘and the Lacanian term for the strange “substance” which must be added so that a Cause obtains its positive ontological consistency [...] is of course enjoyment’, or *jouissance*.²² Nationalism ‘thus presents a privileged domain of the eruption of enjoyment into the social field’ as a regulatory factor in the interpretation of *jouissance*, or of *being* – of being Irish, of constructing an identity position from the inexpressible and, I would argue, highly mutative sense of somatic substantiality sanctioned by nationalism. A major vector for the transmittance of the Nation-thing in Irish culture is landscape, conceived of as ‘the inscape of national identity’, a force which makes visible the strategic essentialism of representative cultural space in the scrupulously political interest of pedagogy. It can, as in the example of Constance Markievicz’s speech, which opens this chapter, be interpreted as a regulatory tenet organising private enjoyment in the

interests of national affinity, but the affection it engenders is not reducible to this. I am not attempting to argue for the authenticity of national sentiment as it is stoked and centralised through strategic essentialism, but rather to point to the volatility of this site of realisation: the national subject, partaking of pleasure in the Nation-thing, brings to this process a capacity to experience *jouissance* that is always in excess of ideological proscription. We are speaking now of something which originates in the intimate and affective zone of production celebrated by Negri as a force for the creation of *subversive* subject-positions.

1.3 *The Kitsch*

Seán Hillen's *Irelantis* (1999) [fig. 1], a series of paper collages, is given special mention by Graham in *Deconstructing Ireland* (2007) as a vision for Ireland as *crise pléthorique* – as an absent signified whose subsequent proliferation of unstable and swiftly obsolete signs and supplements (where *supplement* is understood in the Derridean sense of both duplicating and replacing that to which it refers) responds, arguably, to the libidinal exigencies of Žižek's Nation-thing. It is also significant that the logic of excess at work in *Irelantis* amasses fragments of cultural iconography as detritus and evokes, at times, a mood both excremental and eschatological: what Arthur Kroker has called 'the ecstatic implosion of postmodern [Irish] culture into excess, waste, and disaccumulation', and which Graham compares to a 'recorded scream'.²³ That the scream is *recorded*, detached from the event of its origin and recoded as a sign for this lost event, also models the supplement, so that its operation in *Irelantis* does not result in a healthful obliteration of false icons but rather a reimagining of the wreckage that piles up before the Angel of History. Fintan O'Toole's 1999 introduction to *Irelantis* celebrates its depiction of 'contemporary, globalised Ireland [as] a society that became postmodern before it ever quite managed to be modern', and which has gone from being 'defiantly closed to being completely porous to

whatever dream is floating out there in the media ether'²⁴; by 2011, however, this sense of 'wit and invention' at the follies of 'hyper-globalised Ireland' has been muted, and the most notable thing about *Irelantis* 'is above all the approach of apocalypse':

The montages are full of explosions, inundations, precipices, whirlpools, lightning storms and earthquakes. There is a haunting image of the Stephen's Green shopping centre in Dublin as a Hiroshima-style ruin. Fabulous inventions they may be, but Hillen's creations now seem weirdly prescient and ruefully realistic.²⁵

Violence, in 1999, is iconoclastic. In 2011, after a major financial crash and the crisis of citizenship generated by sovereign debt, violence is possessed of moral authority as hygienic intervention: *Irelantis* is *aftermath*, a dark moment before an enlightened dawn, when fidelity to both essentialist iconography and the profligacy it seems to license will become things of the past. This movement is not only native to the linear and amnesiac spirit of progressivism; it also models, in miniature, the transition from emblems of accumulation to those of the aesthetically austere terrain of symbolic exchange – self-regulating market logic, itself a self-alienating *economic* essentialism – which obscures the visible trappings of labour production. Kroker's view of late modern culture as oscillating always between panic and apathy at least militates against this kind of mendacity, and makes it possible to read *Irelantis*, not as a moment passing with a 'scream' into history, but rather a dilated meditation on the nation's ambivalent contingency on symbolic mediation. It also acutely registers, as O'Toole suggests, Ireland's passage into postmodernity, which is to say into the age of affect.

Such affective assemblages, linked by Graham and O'Toole to a form of utopianism, create a fantasy space. One of the images from *Irelantis*, 'The Great Pyramids of Carlingford Lough', 'quotes' a John Hinde image and capitalises on the latter's signature use of an artificially

enhanced colouration, intended to make its subject look so vivid that, in the exaggerations of *Ireland*, it becomes unreal. In the 1960s and 70s, colour artists employed by Hinde to touch-up picture postcards of Irish scenes would be instructed to ‘make jumper red’ or ‘change colour of car to yellow’: ‘Why red or yellow? Simple, it made the finished cards stand out on the rotating wooden display stands and make our competitors tear out their hair’.²⁶ Value judgments about colour and Irishness thus vary from the exotic to the semiotic logic of instant gratification, itself a version of hypermediation which signals desire through colour-tone, and which approximates the ‘metastatic’ form of consumption Morton, after Colin Campbell, accounts for as ‘Romantic consumerism’ – consumption of the sign as much as, or *instead* of, the signified. This is a form of consumerism first appears in tandem, and responds to, imperialist expansion, especially its orientalist emphasis in art and advertisement on a fantasy land of voluptuousness; what Morton calls ‘the poetics of spice’, an event of consumption not restricted to the imbibing of *actual* substances, but rather consumed ‘in lieu’ via signs for its displaced or absent signified.

The similarities between this and Graham’s citational ‘Ireland’, an unstable or notional signified giving rise to a proliferation of supplementary signs, not unlike the proliferation of products aimed at subtending commodity fetishism, are self-evident – with the key addition of Morton’s focus on the poetics of spice as manifest, repeatedly, as ‘spectral’, gaseous, quasi-substantial, or ambient. This trope links Derrida’s spectres of abstract capital to the enduring *material* expressions of ‘marks, traces, touches, and dashes’ – iconographic and scriptural signs – associated with the coalescence of signs into substances. ‘The luxury commodity is not just an ‘incarnated’ sign [...] but is spectral. The luxury commodity is in the realm of the signifier but is also somewhat spookily ‘really there’: a sign of incarnation’. This is *spooky* because it is not wholly solid, but quasi-solid, or spectral, and spectrality ‘suggests the supernatural, a different, parallel order of materiality’.²⁷ The red of John Hinde can be thought of as a manifestation of this promissory spectrality, or of the poetics of peatsmoke. Two significant qualities are inherent in

these poetics: in the first, its material expression as a quasi-substantial ‘spectre’ or trace and, in the second, its openness to gleeful declension into kitsch, a condition of its association with the simultaneously abstract and excremental category of luxury. Both the effervescent sign for value indicated by ‘aura’ and the ossification of decadence into detritus thus concretise the follies of money-value as cycle of constant renewal and waste: that both categories call for excess indicates their perceptual, conceptual, and effectual origin in *affect*, and it is through affect that their semantic agglutination may be diffused and revised.

A short essay by Laura U. Marks, which takes ‘hypermediation’ in corporate culture as its subject, touches with useful brevity on certain sociological developments in the West that are relevant here. The ‘hyper’ element of Marks’s analysis refers to an aggressive acceleration of ‘faux sociality’ in late capitalist society, whereby ‘corporate branding and other forms of pre-digested experience permeate the very life of senses’, interposing between the subject and the external environment by coding, in advance, all encounters with natural signs.²⁸ Marks also points to a truncation of semiotic *stages*: corporate saturation (‘streets thick with signage’) hijacks the perceptual experience of ‘Firstness’ (phenomenological immediacy, and naïveté) and reduces it to ‘Secondness’ (the ability to ‘act accordingly’, or take direction, in response to signs), dispensing with the state of ‘Thirdness’, which is to say reacting to sensation with agency *as affect*:

Clearly, something is lost in the speed of this semiotic handover. Or rather, two things: the ability to receive our own impressions (Firstness) and the ability to make our own judgements (Thirdness). If experience consists of the lively flow between impression, perception, action, and reflection, then – especially for those of us living in postindustrial, information-dependant societies – these breaks in semiotic flow make it difficult for us to have our own experience.²⁹

Inhabitants of ‘information-dependant’ societies, then, are reduced to taking direction in reaction to sensual stimuli, rather than engaging with stimuli subjectively. Marks’s image of corporate interest overcoding quotidian phenomenology also suggests an irradiated extension of the hegemonic logic governing *all* systems of signification which privilege sign over signified. If language necessitates the death of the thing – or rather its expulsion beyond the realm of language, to a marginal position from which it continues to menace signification – the arid excesses of hypermediation present an illusory, but persuasive, antidote to the threat of the Real, asserting that the sign itself *is* a signified and foreclosing on further engagement beyond this quantal claim. A similar logic is at work in the supplement of ‘Ireland’, a proliferation of signs which promise authenticity but renege on this because they are not underwritten by a stable signified – there is no authoritative Ireland to license the plethora of signs trafficking as ‘Ireland’.

The logic of hypermediation is one of reduction; the logic of the *crise pléthorique* is one of proliferation, but both modes are invested in reordering the reality of response to a lived environment. Graham’s ‘Ireland’ overcodes Ireland as much as a logo. Both also trade in simulacra, and are committed to constructing synthetic *spatial* fields; in employing an abundance of sensory signs with the aim of persuading the subject that he or she is having an authentic experience – although the question of what an authentic experience consists in is less easy to explain. Graham’s analysis of the discourse of Irish authenticity suggests a morass of signs with little hard matter behind them, but, at the same time, the search for authenticity must go on, since its persistent failure is also its inspiration. Spivak, accounting for Derrida’s supplement as that which doubles and supplants an original, points to the symbiotic status of signified and supplement: ‘the so-called appropriate enunciation of a truth [Ireland] can only be defined over against that *in*-appropriate enunciation [‘Ireland’] which wrenches a truth into a context other than its own and uses it as mere citation’.³⁰ Every time a quest for meaning produces ‘Ireland’, a renewed pursuit of *Ireland* is also launched, just as the compulsive search for novelty native to

capitalism is reproduced at the level of sensory life, with the pursuit of superior forms of somatic experience forming a part of commodity culture. Plasticity, and the personal insult it presents to the entitled subject of a simultaneously individuating and homogenising historical moment, may actually substantiate a faith in the final authority of the real.

This logic is strongly at work in Lloyd's theorisation of Irish kitsch as a potential source of political subversion. In 'The Recovery of Kitsch', he contends with the 'apparently inevitable declension of the icons of authentic national culture into kitsch', a development which arises from a combination of iconic saturation and economic exigency – phenomena which collectively ensure the expulsion of certain forms of cultural expression from the semiotic circuit of national life. Ash tray harps and pastoral mannerism must cease to function as the furniture of a uniquely Irish *Umwelt* and become, instead, so much waste; emblematising 'cultures that have been cast from futurity by the state' but which testify, in the 'wasted particulars' of their semiotic ossification, to the potential for 'another living'.³¹ Irish, and especially diasporic Irish, kitsch, is the afterlife of such emotional/polemical fusions as the Celtic twilight or the promised land, as their 'wasted particulars' have hardened into ciphers of such abstract severity that all coherence and worthiness falls away, leaving, at best, the pleasure of spectacle. The fact that kitsch always lurks in art, waiting to emerge and deny the rarity or sublimity of the viewer's response, potentially indicates that kitsch serves the additional and pernicious purpose of interpreting idealism as 'passé': detritus generated by market forces which command the constant renewal and proliferation of products but also, by a sleight of ideological cruelty, cast a deal of these as abject.

In his frequent use of the word 'congealed' to explain the affective compression undertaken by kitsch, Lloyd suggests a material state between formless and form which is appropriate to the subject, since the transformation from 'icon' to kitsch is itself a movement from object to junk, where junk is a vulgar substrate of the forces of production. The world of

industry generates substrates that are genuinely formless, inassimilable, or threatening, like chemical waste – so much of which, incidentally, is associated with neon green, emphasising its grotesque affront to the natural – and part of what Lloyd is arguing for in his effort to valorise ‘wasted particulars’ is similar to nuclear guardianship, an environmentalist theory which posts that cultures, and even spiritual systems, should be obliged to ‘grow up around the tending of [abject substances]’.³² The point of this would be to inculcate horror at historical violence by keeping the emblems of its toxicity in plain sight; in a similar way, Lloyd’s recalcitrant kitsch exposes the sacrificial mechanics of cultural hegemony. This, however, is not the limit of Lloyd’s argument, and the kind of kitsch he is talking about does not simply act as a memorial or memento mori. It is more totemic – a projection which continues to propagate subjectivity. His analysis of a gable-end mural in West Belfast by Gerry Kelly, which references the mannerist Celticism of Jim Fitzpatrick, is especially illustrative of the projective/subjective, or alienating, dynamic accruing to strategic essentialism. For Lloyd this mural galvanises an ‘atrophied aesthetic’ to ‘emphasize the discrete but unhistoricized continuities of cultural resistance’ within irredentism; the problem with this is that the marginal subjectivities which emerge in response to this fragmentary aesthetic – subject-positions ‘whose survival lies in the perpetual differentiation from the norms of dominant society’ – must be homogenised, a reading which, as Graham has argued at length in response to Lloyd, necessitates a misinterpretation of subalternity as a category not subject to internal hierarchisation. Graham proposes that this is unsustainable; at the same time, however, there is something to be said for Lloyd’s analysis of what are, in effect, examples of degraded essentialism. For one thing, Graham’s refutation of Lloyd vastly underestimates the role of emotion in conditioning and complicating interactions with the kitsch: taste in the face of tat, as it were, does not preclude libidinal investment, since kitsch remains ‘a labour of love’ and retains a latent power to devastate.

That which the kitsch primarily threatens is art, or rather the notion of authentic expression and communion, especially inter-subjective communion, through art. As Morton glosses, kitsch poses a risk because you have to ‘get into it’, running the risk of having one’s subjective integrity compromised by the false democracy of automatism. Kitsch ‘preys on fictitious feelings, thereby neutralising real ones’ by denying the singular nature of personal experience, and the menace of this lies not in the risk that my feelings might be mimicked and marketed back to me, but in the darker suggestion that these feelings were never mine to begin with.³³ If the kitsch may be interpreted as subversive, then, it is because it exposes the gulf or lapse between agency and instruction normally eclipsed by mediation – the command to ‘feel’ something excessively modelled by a cartoon landscape, or a leprechaun in a snow globe – is exposed as a synthetic and wholly unreasonable demand because its sensory exuberance and totemic familiarity has gone too far, transgressing or perverting the dominant semiotic system. At the same time, and this is crucial, ‘[kitsch] has no power except for the love we invest in it’, from whence it derives its capacity to expose this love as ‘idiotic’.³⁴ Adorno expresses as much when he describes the kitsch as evidence that ‘you have wasted your life’; a phrase Lloyd revises, suggesting instead that ‘your life has been wasted for you’, your reactions tapped to substantiate a ‘false sociality’. Kitsch is always a few steps from fascism because both subscribe to an illusory unity generated by the zombie logic of automatism – and because kitsch and fascist are the terms we give to modes of distasteful automatism we consider to be remote from us.

Jean-Luc Nancy ascribes the same powers of overwrought stupefaction considered to generate kitsch to the music of National Socialism, describing the rhetorical transition staged between a ‘profound and ineffable interiority’ – ‘sentiment’ – and the orchestration of affect intrinsic to propaganda. The result of this is that a specific subject position (citizen) becomes the only signified to which a particular system of musical signage (‘expansion, outpouring, overflowing, dilation and sublimation’) refers.³⁵ In its recourse to embodied experience,

designating space through its 'expansion' and echoing, as Nancy points out, both dance and architecture as 'the arts of expansion', this musical signage derives legitimation from sensory immediacy, presenting instruction (Secondness) as event (Firstness). This 'expansion' processes essentialism as atmospheric. Of course, intense convictions which are orchestrated by affective events do not always lead to the third Reich; my point is simply that their rhetorical lambency is a condition of processed Firstness, the intensity of immediate encounter, a neurological force which is brief but effects a sensation 'remembered', or rather interpreted ('for you'), in light of Secondness. Marks insists on the ethical value of Firstness as a 'precious', embodied, avenue of escape from hypermediation. Lloyd, on the other hand, differs considerably in investing in what might be described as fossilised Firstness (alienated affect) as a source of superior mediation and, moreover, of authentic meaning: the route to Ireland via 'Ireland' after all.

Brian Massumi, in his account of the autonomy of affect, reflects on the necessary disconnect between outer (skin; affect) and inner (cerebral; interpretative) responses to stimuli:

the primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between *content* and *affect*: it would appear that the strength or duration of an image's effect is not logically connected to the context in any straightforward way [...] indexing fixes the *quality* of the image; the strength or duration of the image's effect could be called its *intensity*. What comes out here is that there is no correspondence or conformity between quality and intensity. If there is a relation, it is of another nature.³⁶

To put this otherwise, signification fixes the quality, which is to say the meaning, of an image, a composition, or any arrangement of symbols, while the strength or duration of the impact of this formation – a response, on behalf of the subject, which is reactive rather than interpretative – is governed by some other, incidental or capricious, logic without or beyond the ordinations of

signification. This is the same as saying that affect is in excess of signification, which is precisely what Negri contends in his reading of affect as occupying the same location, within the cosmology of capitalism, as labour-power. Under primitive accumulation, labour and use-value are self-sustaining categories predating the hierarchising and abstract exigencies of exchange-value, which would measure value on the basis of spectral markers of worth that do not relate to use-value (symbolic exchange). Having striven to absorb the original use-value of labour-power into its signifying superstructures, capitalism ‘increasingly [succeeds] at defining the use-value of labour power in terms of exchange-value’, and of socialising the logic of exchange so extensively that all of life takes place within what is, in fact, a zone of supplementarity – a universe of signs for value underwritten by absent signifiers, whose actual, primitive, value, would otherwise be defined by use-value.³⁷ In Morton’s archaeology, the moment at which Romantic consumerism takes hold as the guiding logic of exchange-value coincides with the conversion of the labour-value of sub-continental colonies into a poetics of spice, where spice itself enjoins the spectral texture of speculative lucre and obscures the affective labour which, in fact, sustains it.

Where Graham reads ‘the joyous uncovering of myths of origins *as myths* and signs of reality *as signs*’ as a response to a perennially ‘quaking’ or unstable signified, Negri tracks the gradual disconnection of value, which originates in labour-power, from the concrete processes and sites of labour production.³⁸ Under late capitalism the logic of money-value, with its abstract notions of accretion and exchange, is divorced from that of use-value, with the result, for Negri, that the *value* of labour-power is no longer dictated by capitalism and is returned, instead, to the site of its production. The more this latent potential (a ‘power to act’) is obscured or ignored by political economy, which cannot account for it, the more labour-power ‘is extended and intervenes in a global terrain, a biopolitical terrain’, validating the labour-producer in a way that is analogous to, but transcendent of, Marx’s original ambitions for the insurrectionary potential of the proletariat. This is, in a way, a means of updating the proletarian potential for insurrection in

an era in which the proletariat, at least in the West, is less and less visible as a body of social actors or a force for change; for Negri, the strength of conviction and value this class might have had is transferred to the affective zone of embodied productivity:

The more the theory of value loses its reference to the subject [...] the more the value of labor resides in affect, that is, in living labor that is made autonomous in the capital relation, and expresses – through all the pores of singular and collective bodies – its powers of self-valorization.³⁹

Labour, then, is paradoxically restored to its status as un-alienated by the worst excesses of alienation; use-value begins to override exchange-value, and the human body begins to resist biopolitics. This reading offers an articulation of faith in affect as a force for the restructuring of civic life; the operations of affect in *Irelantis* are more pessimistic because the invitation to apocalypse suggested by a conflict of semantic intensity and ideological disillusionment is not actually carried through. Hillen's collages stay the moment of excess and semiotic congestion as a series of frozen scenarios, in which cultural iconography becomes science fiction, invoking the chemical purity of a form of affect which functions as both the psychotic extension and the final deconstruction of symbolic authority.

Bringing this, once more, to bear on the concept of the Nation-thing – which is to say exchanging the proscriptions of value-exchange for those of nationalism, and the potentially subversive excesses of affective production for the *jouissance* which responds and gives substance to 'the Nation qua thing' – means investing in the libidinal national subject as capable of transcending ideological proscription, and rethinking this *jouissance* as a site for the revision of relational logics without the frameworks of political economy. The cultural fragments and residues of those critics Carville would fault, and the strain of identity politics which posits a

retrievable authenticity or purity, propose an essentially similar course of action, and this is one way in which Negri's formation may be critiqued. In response to this, I, like Hillen, would stay the moment of symbolic agglutination, implosion, and opacity; this can, among other things, be counterposed to the putative 'translucence' of national 'spirit', and particularly introduce a degree of materiality which interacts with Romantic notions of the nation-space as ambient territory but pushes these in the more deconstructive direction opened up by ambient poetics – and, more pointedly, by ambience as a *sinthome*.

1.5 The *Sinthome*

I have opened this chapter with a quotation from a speech by the revolutionary nationalist Constance Markievicz, because the compellingly meaningless image of 'Sinn Féin colours' in the landscape registers, if somewhat whimsically, several strands of analysis which are relevant here. Since the tricolour, although used as an ensign for Ireland since the eighteenth century, was first officially flown over the GPO during Easter week, Markievicz's error in identifying the orange bar as 'yellow' seems apiece with a certain degree of confusion surrounding the names and signs for this event in its immediate aftermath. That the orange bar continues, at least anecdotally, to be mistaken for yellow or gold suggests both the gulf between a perceptual event and its linguistic signifier and, by extension, the way in which meaning and non-meaning exist in close proximity where the arbitrary harmony of the tricolour is concerned. A flag is an articulation contingent on the more primitive elements of visual signification – colour hue – and there can be no such thing as an original flag, since 'the flag itself is always a reproduction (if there can be a reproduction when there is no original)' – which of course there can be, and this would come under the classic definition of *simulacrum*, meaning that the tricolour, or any flag, if we follow this logic to its

conclusion, simulates, emulates, or otherwise aspires to a condition which does not, originally or otherwise, exist.⁴⁰

Markievicz's prospect of Sinn Féin landscape points towards a simulacral state which borders on psychosis or utopia, layering space with a palimpsest of pure enjoyment: it is an especially good example because, in Markievicz, the excessive tenor of this enjoyment is comparable to other, less irrational, joys – why doesn't Constance, the ascendancy countess, simply 'enjoy' some bucolic estate, or take up her rightful place riding to harriers at Lissadel? The enjoyment of *jouissance* does not work in the interests of the subject, from a practical perspective, because it offers residual access to the Real which goes beyond the Symbolic or logical and is, in a quite literal way, physiological (an event of the 'gut'). Like surplus-value, *jouissance* represents surplus-pleasure, a disorganised and meaningless joy that 'outbids and disturbs the balanced or weighed-up promises of love, pleasure, happiness, and satisfactions of interest because enjoyment as part of the Real, elicited by the superego, and the object of the drives is an irreducible surplus that cannot be easily attained or abandoned'.⁴¹ The *sinthome*, which might be imperfectly glossed as a sign for pure *jouissance*, is similarly 'free-floating', 'prior [to] discursive binding'; a 'psychotic kernel evading the discursive network'.⁴² Very often this surplus-pleasure is taken in the renunciation of ordinary pleasure, through asceticism, nihilism, or masochism, and the examples offered by Žižek range from lovesickness to fascism. We might think of the joke about the Irish boomerang, which doesn't come back but sings about coming back.

Jouissance, as it interacts with ideology, may be defined as an over-identification with those 'joins' in the superstructure normally held at a distance or mystified – with the emissaries of the Nation-thing, its icons and signs, which, as Graham shows, have a tendency to end up in a Baudrillardian 'museum of junk'.⁴³ Such 'things', as we have seen, may be theorised as the material leavings of abstract propositions, such as nationhood, which must hail the subject and so

extend into the subject's phenomenal and libidinal field: they are concretised in the *sinthome* as obscene. The subversive capacities of the *sinthome*, the possibility it presents for a critique of ideology, reside in this encounter with *jouissance*, and are made clearer in Morton's gloss:

The sinthome is the materially embodied, meaningless, and inconsistent kernel of "idiotic enjoyment" that sustains an otherwise discursive ideological field. The sinthome of homophobia, for instance, might be an image of the "queer," or a certain kind of sex act. Ideology resides in the distance we assume toward this fantasy object. By collapsing the distance we undermine the potency of the ideological field. Within every field is a symptom, and every symptom can be made to vomit forth a sinthome. By assuming with pride the word *queer*, the gay movement disabled the ideological field that sustains homophobia. This paradoxical act of identification with the fantasy object of ideology could be mirrored in critical analysis, by the relentless close reading of texts, not in order to achieve some tasteful distance toward them, but precisely in order to "mess around" with them, or as my students sometimes say in horror, "dissect".⁴⁴

We might ask, why *sinthome*, and not symptom? *Sinthome*, in the first, provides more scope for associative extension, being related by Lacan to St. Thomas (*st-thome*) and as such to the wound of Christ, an association which permits of 'vaginal connotations [...] a *wound* that is also a *space*', which are, in particular, relevant to Morton's demotic use of the term. Kelsey Wood similarly accounts for it as 'a freely floating core of "*jonis*-sense" or "enjoy-ment" that constitutes everyday reality by serving as the core of some ideology'.⁴⁵ There is a further difference to be observed between the simpler psychological unit of the symptom, a 'tic' testifying to the untranslatability of the unconscious in the terms of the symbolic, and the *sinthome*. This relates to the concept of 'lalangue', or the non-communicative elements of language which, through their meaningless play

on sounds and embodiment, engender *jouissance*. It is also rooted in a reading of *Finnegans Wake*, and as such this particular manifestation of language should be seen as the originary example of sintho-matic expression. I stress this both to balance out the low-cultural *jouissance* I have sketched so far, and to draw attention to the fact that Lacan, casually and without elaborating on its implications, first explains the sinthome as a peculiarly, even pathologically, *Irish* ‘tic’.

Joyce’s *sinthome* is not our *sinthome*, or symptom, because it does not provide access into his unconscious or our respective unconsciousness. It is, instead, a force which ‘[deranges] language and subjectivity in order to create new possibilities’, especially since it ‘allows one to change volition by apprehending one’s identity as a construction’.⁴⁶ ‘The *Symptom* in Joyce is a symptom that doesn’t concern you at all. It’s the symptom insofar as there is no chance that it hooks you up to something of your unconscious’, beyond externalising its ‘tic’ or testament:

I have said that the unconscious is structured like a language. It is strange that I should also describe someone who, strictly speaking, only plays upon language as not hooked up to the unconscious – even though he uses the one language that isn’t his own – for his own was wiped off the map, that is, Gaelic, of which he knew a little, enough to orient himself, but not a lot – not his own, therefore, but that of the invaders, the oppressors. Joyce said that in Ireland one has a master and a mistress, the master being the British Empire and the mistress being the holy, Roman, and apostolic church, both being the same kind of scourge. This is exactly what is to be noted in what turns Joyce into the symptom, a pure symptom of what the relation to language is like insofar as it’s reduced to a symptom – namely, to its effect, when that effect isn’t analysed.⁴⁷

This formulation provides us with a useful figure for explaining the *sinthome* as it manifests in ideology, as an effect that ‘isn’t analysed’, or analysable, but which still presents itself as a substantial and ‘materially embodied’ representation – one which nonetheless does not communicate anything other than the tautological ‘tic’ of its self-presencing, the most basic unit of ontological vitality. It is not the absence of meaning but a meaningful gesture without meaning; something which falls short of the liminal immanence of, in the case above, the Nation-thing, but which also registers the presence of this Nation-thing. It is important to say that *Finnegans Wake*, for Lacan, is not a nonsense text or some kind of autonomic affective event. The work is, rather, a manifestation of Joyce’s symptomatic mediation of language (or *lalangue*) as an effect of the unconscious which does not disclose anything meaningful about the unconscious, but which also transcends the standardised system of language. Its result is something we can propose to decipher intellectually, but such a process of deciphering, whatever it may reveal about the phonetic, philosophical, semantic, or libidinal inheritances of language, still does not disclose anything true of the unconscious. This is the irreducible kernel, the *jouissance*, of *Finnegans Wake*. It cannot, for all the efforts of critical theory or genetic deconstruction, be ‘stripped bare’, which does not, at the risk of labouring my point for emphasis, mean that there is a coherent secret ‘locked into’ *Finnegans Wake*, ultimately available to those who crack the code. There is simply a form of expression which is non-communicative but yet material. Lacan’s is, of course, one among many proposed explanations for the linguistic opacity of this text, and my reason for citing is here is simply to extract the *sinthome* for application elsewhere.

Reading Lacan’s Joycean *sinthome* to be a force for expressive derangement, then, it is important to ensure that we do not confuse the figure with its effect – if the opacity of language in a work like *Finnegans Wake* reroutes the intentional program of a phrase, an ideology, or a historical narrative, this is an effect of the *sinthome* but not a *sinthome* in itself. The *sinthome* should

be thought of as a kind of chemical concentration, in which the emotional and libidinal *contingencies* of ideology are exposed:

If we consider the role of the *sinthome* in the construction of the ideological edifice, we are compelled to rethink the “criticism of ideology” [characteristic of critical theory]. Ideology is usually conceived as a discourse: as an enchainment of elements the meaning of which is overdetermined by their specific articulation [...] But when we take into account the dimension of the *sinthome*, it is no longer sufficient to denounce the “artificial” character of the ideological experience, to demonstrate the way the object experienced by ideology as “natural” and “given” is effectively a discursive construction [...] it is no longer enough to locate the ideological text in its context, to render visible its necessarily overlooked margins. What we must do [...] is to *isolate* the *sinthome* from the context by virtue of which it exerts its power of fascination in order to expose the *sinthome*’s utter stupidity [...] This kind of “estrangement” is perhaps even more radical than is Brechtian *Verfremdung* [defamiliarisation]: the former produces a distance not by locating the phenomenon in its historical totality, but by making us experience the utter nullity of its immediate reality, of its stupid, material presence that escapes “historical mediation”.⁴⁸

Through a process of ‘relentless close reading’, a kind of symbolic decomposition may occur, allowing for a symbolic economy to be viewed awry as a symbolic *ecology*, or interaction of separate parts whose assemblage both honours the intentional program of its message and remains irreducible to, or in excess of, this program – both because its reliance on *jouissance* means that it cannot be contained and because its materiality is irreversible. It is important to note that the ‘deep’ feeling of libidinal connection spatialised in the subject and via the perceptual

channels, in particular voice and gaze, which serve as ideological vectors, is inaugurated in the experience of ideological commitment and does not predate this. The ethical implications of this, for Žižek, involve discrediting the ideological structure sustained by a particular event of *jouissance* by exposing this structure as reliant on the base impulses of *jouissance* rather than on the authority of its signs. To defamiliarise ideological commitment as sintho-matic investment is not the same as mocking it, since mockery still places ideology as a distance, holding open a space for the institution of a new, improved, ideology: the *sinthome*, rather, embraces it as stupid, as licensing a surrender of critical choice that cannot even be granted malicious political agency. This constitutes a bleaker twist on Lacan's Joycean *jouissance*, but continues to foreground opacity; in this case a libidinal charge denuded of political over-coding and reduced to nothing more than a libidinal charge. Whilst such a demotion reveals the contingency of an ideological system, it also explains its appeal, and what particularly interests me is the fate of material hosts and material residues once these ideological assemblages have declined to detritus or kitsch, or been otherwise exposed as mere vectors for an erotic investment in excess of the intentional program of their strategic articulation. It is worth restating that the residue or post-/pre-ideological mass I am finally thinking of here is landscape, national *territory*, and/or national *atmosphere*.

1.6 Love of Ireland

An important idea presented by Graham is that of 'Ireland' as a citational supplement which registers the utopian valency of the never-quite-accomplished Nation-thing, always lacking an authentic *res* to which its phenomenal latency might be conclusively attached, and as such finding temporary shape in a host of mutative signs. 'Whether the causes are identified as inherent in the strict teleology of nationalism, in the call to past and future which colonialism demands of the anti-colonial, or in the conditions of production inescapable in modern and postmodern

capitalism', where the latter would account especially for the plasticity of the *crise pléthorique*, Ireland finds itself 'a concept trapped in, and trying to free itself by deploying, a complex utopianism; accepting, for now, the current of unfixability, 'Ireland' sails symbolically on the Gulf Stream, awaiting a docking with itself at some future (always future) moment'.⁴⁹ The deferred status of the nation is also the mineralised motility of the Nation-thing. 'Ireland' might well describe the tricolour, which is a supplement, since, *pace* Derrida, it both doubles and supplants that which it refers to: as an 'action', or rather as an 'actant', a substance which engenders affect, it inhabits the space of *jouissance*. There is no original flag, every flag is a citation, and every flag is also subject to the symbolic decomposition which would deprive it of meaning by 'deranging' its articulation – a gesture Markievicz's 'yellow' ebbs towards, without intending to.

This is a sign for an absent, dispersed, or, in Graham's case, future Thing. Such absence may be seen to interact with or subtend the fact that all signs and symbols are ultimately representative, according to a certain linguistic economy, of *death*, or of that which, by dint of being named and brought to symbolic meaning, must be killed:

Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings being to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings *to* their being *from out of* their being. Such saying is a projecting of the clearing, in which announcement is made of what it is that beings coming into the Open *as*.⁵⁰

This is, of course, not the end of the Real from whence these language-objects came; there remains 'an ineluctable presence – the thingness of the thing – that we can never grasp', but which has recently been subject to critical analysis under 'thing theory'.⁵¹ This before-and-after, or thingly latency, is often processed as a mode of alterity recalcitrant to categorisation and enjoining, therefore, an ethical obligation to non-identity. One of its manifestations is, arguably,

the sheer ‘thereness’ of the substance of the *sinthome* as semantic stumbling-bloc; it also functions in a way similar to the share of unregulated affect relevant to Negri’s theory of affect-value, and to what Blanchot called ‘the relation of the third kind’, ‘[an] interruption escaping all measure [which is] nevertheless a relation; at least if I take it upon myself not to reduce it, that is, not to seek to consider it as the ‘faltering’ mode of a still unitary elation’ in which things would be categorised, objectified, or otherwise forcibly related.⁵² This idea of an other, to whom the subject owes some debt of attention, regard, or even care in spite of its estrangement, will become important here. Significantly, since we have been talking about inert or non-communicative materiality, it may be observed that the dead matter, or ‘othered’ matter, and most specifically the ‘simultaneously charismatic and abject’ phenomenon of the *corpse*, is an articulation of this.

The title of this section, ‘love of Ireland’, is taken from a painting whose use of the tricolour brings to mind, and is positioned in close temporal and sentimental proximity to, that of Markievicz. These words hover in the darkly vacant right-hand space of John Lavery’s death-portrait of the IRA commander Michael Collins, painted as Collins lay in state following his assassination in 1922 [fig. 2]. The corpse is draped in a richly-textured tricolour, the bright colours of which are in contrast to its face, replete with luminously pallid complexion, and set against a dark bolster and the darker flatness of the background. Lavery also painted Collins’s funeral, showing, from the raised perspective of a gallery, a host of clerical figures in white who bow to a coffin draped in another tricolour, the white band of which, this time, constitutes the bright centre of the painting’s perspectival grid. This is not dissimilar, in terms of composition, to Lavery’s *High Treason: The Trial of Roger Casement* (1916), in which all gazes are averted but for the, also luminous, raised face of a woman who looks at Casement – if we put these three beside one another, live faces, dead faces, and tricolours share a common or citational association with this shade of white. *Michael Collins* is, however, a very different painting, not only because it is a portrait, nor even because its subject is dead, but rather because the inclusion of words in the

image seems so unusual – and unnecessary. The floating epitaph is sentimental and, juxtaposed with the corpse, obscene, in the sense of that which will not remain hidden: the enjoyment of ‘love’, the *jouissance* of the Nation-thing, radically registered in the dead individual whose death has stemmed directly from this love, or from a manifestation of violence in response to ‘love of Ireland’. ‘It is not for nothing’, Robert Harrison explains, ‘that the Greek word for “sign”, *sema*, is also the word for “grave”. It was a sign that signified the source of signification itself, since it “stood for” what it “stood in” – the ground of burial as such’, but also the dead person, or death more generally, which is the beginning of signification on a less literal scale.⁵³ The *sema* also points to something ‘present only in and through its sign’, like, among many other things, the Nation-thing, here registered as a sign (the flag) *and* as a thing; as *the* Thing – as the residual thingliness of the corpse, ‘a site of ideological recalcitrance and disorientation, a vestigial thing’.⁵⁴ For David Sherman, the corpse’s peculiar role in modern society is to translate this affective excess into what he calls ‘mortal obligation’, a phenomenon not dissimilar to Harrison’s ‘dynamism’ of the corpse-as-thing; a relational event ‘which, in its subjection to the power of death, binds past, present, and future’:

The past (or no-longer-here-ness of the person), the present (the corpse in its presence-at-hand), and the future (the fate awaiting those who follow in the footsteps of the deceased) all converge in the dead body, as long, that is, as it remains an object of concern or solicitude for the living. A corpse in itself is neither disquieting nor disclosive. Only in its genealogical, sentimental, or institutional relation to the surviving loved one does it become the personification of transcendence.⁵⁵

I would disagree slightly with Harrison on the point of corpse which is ‘in itself’, or unrelated; even in this condition the corpse is, arguably, always ‘disquieting’, although perhaps not

‘disclosive’ in the sense he intends here. This point intersects with the larger concern of Sherman’s *In a Strange Room* (2014), which views the traditional, tribal, ethnic, or otherwise culturally enshrined ‘thanatopolitics’ of corpse-disposal as a critical tenet of civilisation lost or threatened to the convulsions of modernity, in response to which ‘modernism’s corpses’ mediate anxieties at the value and valence of human life itself. The corpses in the trenches of the Great War, as Sherman shows through a collection of graphic testimonies, arguably evolved beyond relational dynamism, or at least the kind of relational dynamism with which Harrison charges the corpse as transcendent signifier.

Lacking a clear role in the thanatopolitics of human interaction, the non-relational corpse approaches the thingly status of sheer matter, showing itself to be a host for human animation not reducible to symbolic projections, but retaining its vestigial, ‘thingly’, otherness. This is one of the reasons why the original role of the corpse in most thanatopolitical formations is to disappear in the *right way*; to leave behind a sign which would introduce absence into the symbolic field and thus contain its otherness. Lavery’s painting, if refracted through this theoretical lens, might be read against its intentional grain as positing the awful, or awesome, possibility that the sign for absence might exist alongside the sheer materialisation of absence represented by the corpse; here, the epitaph ‘love of Ireland’ looms from the darkness like the last grin of the Cheshire Cat, a trace declaring this scene an event of affinity with the Nation-thing that also implicates its observers and is, in the sense signalled above, obscene. Harrison’s nexus of relations obscures the thingly latency of the corpse, but it is this element of strangeness which Sherman focuses on, seeing in it a different source of solicitude or obligation; a ‘demand’, instigated by the corpse, for a kind of relation that is no longer possible – one which would, with care and fluency, reproduce the thanatopolitical obligations of the kind of ancestor-cults and established rituals Harrison is committed to. This failure and its ongoing demand are stayed or

suspended in an instant which, across decades and genres, is comparable to the overwrought freeze-frames of *Irelantis*: mortal obligation made kitsch.

To place Collins's death-portrait within this economy is to ask whether 'love of Ireland' makes a demand or offers an incentive to entering into the ideological order of militant nationalism as it is materialised, here, in the *pro-treaty* decantation of national affinity. As a historical twist, this division between pro- and anti-treaty interpretations of 'love of Ireland' marks an ethical tremor of sorts – one which cannot sustain the simplicity of an atavistic 'love of Ireland' and must mature instead into the complexities of the State, as opposed to the 'pure because disempowered' strivings of subalternity.⁵⁶ In a way, the creation of the Free State provides an abstract ideological object in which to anchor the Nation-thing. The inevitable failure of this ideological object to quantify, contain, or otherwise police the *jouissance* invoked by the Nation-thing illustrates a constitutive aspect of the *sinthome* as it is developed by Žižek: namely, that there is nothing appealing or compelling about the arid abstractions of formations like 'Free State' unless enjoyment, which is experienced as more ontologically indispensable than these discursive formations, can be attached to it. It is not so obvious that one will enjoy the Free State; the phrase itself comes to us, contaminated by its historical aftermath, as something of a synonym for disillusionment, provincialism, and compromise. By mobilising Collins's corpse in the interest of licensing the ideological object of the State, Lavery is not so much sacrificing this individual, or making a manipulative play for our sympathy, as rendering visible the *sinthome* whose presence is proof of enjoyment: proof, that is, of too much enjoyment, of expiration through *love*, of Collins's conversion into the materiality of pleasure as this pleasure is understood to be an *indirect* effect of our investment in the ideological object. We are not enjoying the Free State, but rather a variant on the pleasurable Pietà of Edna Longley's Patrick Pearse: 'a suicide who thinks he will be able to watch everyone being sorry' – an effect which both supports the

ideological edifice of the State and reveals its dependency on ‘signifying formation[s] penetrated with enjoyment [...] the signifier as bearer of *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense’.⁵⁷

A portion of this pleasure relates, with similar indirectness, to mortal obligation, since what the corpse both demands and promises is a sense of insertion into the ancestral order of the Nation-thing, a field of belonging experienced as material. With Žižek, we might say that this sense of material presence, which interpolates the world around us and gives substance to an ontological projection, *does not predate* the subject’s interaction with the ideological object, but *remains after it*. Thus Ireland, to borrow once more from Graham’s terminology, must create space for ‘Ireland’ to bring the subject into this libidinal triangulation of self, State, and Nation-thing; ‘Ireland’, subsequently, retains its material volume even after Ireland has withdrawn, or found better symbols, or been obliged to strategically suppress those symbolic emissaries whose reliance on *jouissance* has exposed them as *sinthomes*, as signifiers ‘penetrated with enjoyment’.⁵⁸ The materiality of signs and symbols is always a trace or residue, a *counter-objective* concession to the embodiment of subjectivity, but one which persists after the fact and threatens to supplant the abstraction it envelops and mediates. It is, in a way, *dead matter*, or non-responsive matter, or sintho-matic matter, or the spectral effluence that gives substance to abstract ideas but which is not, itself, available for interpretation.

Let us consider another, textual, example. When James Joyce writes to his brother Stanislaus that the city of Rome reminds him of a man who lives by exhibiting his grandmother’s corpse, he is reacting, among other things, to statues – phenomena which take their first material and metaphysical justification from the dead. Statues also feature prominently in ‘The Dead’, the final story of *Dubliners*, but this time the substance of death is different, taking the form of soulful snow. As Gabriel Conroy falls asleep in the wake of his wife’s revelations about her early love

affair with Michael Furey, 'a few light taps upon the pane' draw his attention to the west-facing window of the Gresham Hotel:

It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves.⁵⁹

This might be the best-known ambient sequence in Irish prose, not only because it gestures beyond itself to a sacralised west, but also because it interacts with the literal space of its inscription formally: it is reproduced in every edition after a 'gap'. What takes place in this temporal lapse of the narrative framework is up for debate. At a structural or generic level it mobilises the 're-mark', 'a kind of echo' serving to limit an event or bracket it against the broader mass – the background 'noise' – it is set against: Morton has called this 'the fundamental property of ambience, its basic gesture'.⁶⁰ Every closed work is subject to dialogue, cross-contamination, and seepage through the parameters established by *parergra* and the re-mark, but these framing devices serve the essential purpose of setting its tone. The re-mark is the fundamental property of ambience because it not only differentiates between foreground and background, but constitutes these *as* foreground and background through its quantal cleaving of a foreground which retains, or seems to retain, elements of its former life as background, or *informe*, or 'Thing In-Itself, or unassimilable environmental totality. Black marks on a page which become words are already a form of re-mark; the gap of 'The Dead' seeks to cut its text and to allow for background matter (the page) to fill this cut, and as such doubles the re-markable qualities of its existence as a text.

In reality, what fills this gap is only 'background' inasmuch as the text may be seen as a hermetic environment; the gap cannot partake (at least not literally) of the greater 'background' beyond it, against which it is re-marked by its paratext. Such a thing may seem obvious or inconsequential, but it matters to *Dubliners* because the close of 'The Dead' really does make a topographic, even topophilic, claim for the territorial mass of Ireland which is far from unique to Joyce and quite possibly constitutes a veiled or sublimated comment on the relation between the cultural Revival and its landscape. This is not to say that Gabriel mis-represents the west through appropriation, turning it into a salve to the anxieties within his marriage; such a reading would imply that there is a 'better' west that could be represented, and thus experienced, as authentic. What Gabriel is doing here is inhabiting a subject-position already constructed by Romanticism (the exemplary citizen as conduit for national *Geist*), Revivalism (the Irishman claiming imaginative territory, or a bond with the land), and modernity (an irreversible break with the past); this subject cannot but encounter the west *as* represented, which is to say as an ideological construct whose points of access centre on embodied encounters with its *signs*: in this instance, snow, 'The Lass of Aughrim', or possibly Gretta Conroy herself.

The gap between the body of the story and its devolution into picturesque serves first to allow for dramatic pause, and subsequently to generate atmosphere. Eric Paul Meljac has stressed the importance of the final 'ominous wall' of empty text at the very end of 'The Dead', since this particular piece of textual architecture suggests a terminus in either sleep or death, implicating the reader in a period of contemplation; the gap beforehand may serve a similar purpose.⁶¹ It may even muffle some violence: zealous psychoanalysis might suggest that the 'cut' models castration, menacing masculine selfhood, or it may be apiece with the quasi-matter of gasworks and spectres Luke Gibbons has detected everywhere in 'The Dead'.⁶² This latter interpretation would lend to the atmosphere it creates a gothic or necromantic intent, especially since Gabriel has already thought, not of exhibiting his grandmother's corpse, but of observing his mortal obligations to

the corpse of his great-aunt Julia: ‘Soon, perhaps, he would be sitting in that same drawing-room, dressed in black, his silk hat on his knees. The blinds would be drawn down and Aunt Kate would be sitting beside him, crying and blowing her nose and telling him how Julia had died. He would cast about in his mind for some words that might console her, and find only lame and useless ones.’⁶³ This anticipation of Julia’s funeral, of the silk hat, the drawn blinds, and the useless platitudes, places Gabriel in a position of social coherence and prestige he has inherited, and as such it is a *fantasy* of filiation; one which slots him into an existing thanatopolitical scene. It may be possible to argue that the theme of hospitality has simply shifted here, growing to encompass, or attempt to encompass, the otherness presented by the host of ghosts which includes ancestor-spirits like ‘Dan’ O’Connell and Johnny the horse, but also the ‘vast’ region of strange souls which appears to be located on or in the west of Ireland. This is the point at which its appropriation becomes troublesome – or may be seen as such, if we extrapolate creatively.

1.7 Green Wounds

With this remaining section I propose a final example of a *sinthome* of Irish national affinity, which also emblematises a vexed interface with the anxieties of affiliation or the nightmare of history. It will also deal with the issue of *jouissance* as ‘self-shattering’, together with the putatively vaginal associations of the *sinthome*, in a way which combines these two to propose an experimentally feminist reading of my final example. The vaginal connotations of the *sinthome* which Morton highlights are the result of three constitutive elements – its status as *residue*, or that which remains after the symbolic potency of the phallus has been delimited in the symbolic economy of sexual difference (in Lacan, *woman* is the *sinthome* of *man*); its appeal as a vector for erotic investment in an ideological edifice (masculinity, nationalism), which constructs it as both an object of desire and an abject vacuum in which the subject risks dissolution; its imagined *shape*,

which is notionally analogous to a wound, because it must impart a rupture, a ‘space’, and a lack (the *sinthome* makes visible the lack of authority finally accruing to ideology). Residue, vacuum, lack: these effects are all dialectically negative. ‘Green wounds’ is a reference to Carville’s critique of what he calls ‘traumaculture’ in Irish cultural theory, and interprets as a strategic essentialising of victimhood; this takes on a deceptively phallic aspect, since the subject who ‘studieth revenge’ to keep his own wounds ‘green’ under the remit of ‘traumaculture’ converts these into a point of moral triumphalism. Carville also quotes Paul Muldoon’s ‘Hard Drive’:

With a toe in the water
and a nose for trouble
and an eye to the future
I would drive through Derryfubble

and Dunnamanagh and Ballyscreen,
keeping that wound green.⁶⁴

This may be a primordial Irish wound: a wound the speaker can oddly, perhaps robotically, ‘studieth’ via a sonnet of sequential clichés and potential allusions to the authority of *dinnseanchas*. It employs a Muldoonian deadpan to suggest a degree of alienation and, for Carville, this is rueful or tongue-in-cheek, rather than sincere. It registers, if accidentally, folkloric associations of green with both Irishness and illness or decay; with, in sympathy with my purposes here, national landscape and the abject or, ultimately, *abjectly vaginal* – ambient poetics, *pace* Morton, as sinthomatic in their promise of ideological unity in environmentalism but subsequent declension into detrital materiality, and atmospheric essentialism as similarly committed to the aim of national unity but declining into kitsch; a condition which both restores and subtends the otherness of the Thing in-itself. In what follows, I will combine this figure (that is, the green *sinthome*) with one

taken from Lloyd's theorisation of colonial modernity and oral space, producing another, mutative, variant on the 'green wound' – the green mouth.

To locate the *sinthome* in the realm of atmospheric essentialism – or rather to show that it is already a figure in this field – it is helpful to point to Žižek's related specification that the *sinthome* is, in effect, a neurosis detached (via a conceptual, or rather pathological, 'swerve') from any possible truth it might represent. It may be alternatively defined as a strategic investment which takes on a fullness and autonomy as a master-signifier, or that which determines and stabilises a symbolic economy, and mediates the enjoyment of strategic investment itself.⁶⁵ Such a configuration endangers critical choice, making of the *sinthome*, as has been said, an 'idiotic' concession to pleasure which, on one level, betrays the degraded or duped status of national affinity, and, on another, actually dissolves ideological proscription in the meaningless intensity of *jouissance*. As such, the *sinthome* may be seen as a sign for the subject's enthrallment, but also for the ambivalent liberty it possesses in *jouissance*, a state of being defined by sensation. Both Negri and Bersani, in different ways, propose this 'gut' or 'orgasmic' dissolution of socialised selfhood, which exists outside the structures of political economy. Its value as an ethical figure is analogous, in a significant way which will be developed in subsequent chapters, to the 'pleasure of the text': a guarantee of irreducible and sensational privacy, where this privacy is not defensive but intimate. By *private*, moreover, I am speaking of a sense of subjective, embodied, omnipotence beyond the reach of those proscriptions which perpetuate themselves as ideological interpellation and indoctrination; the defence presented by *jouissance* is that of a revised definition of narcissism adapted, by Bersani, from Freud. This posits a 'a self-*jouissance* that dissolves the person and thereby, at least temporarily, erases the sacrosanct value of selfhood, a value that may account for human beings' extraordinary willingness to kill in order to protect the seriousness of their statements'.⁶⁶

Bersani's formulations of self-*jouissance* are always, explicitly or implicitly, related to his adjacent writings on homosexuality as a beneficent crisis of overdetermined masculine selfhood. The well-known essay 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' is an angry response to societal abjection of AIDS victims which proposes self-shattering via the symbolic (sintho-matic) and embodied violation of sexual hexis that is the sodomitical scene; its early example both makes its point persuasively and inaugurates two decades' of feminist riposte. To my knowledge, Bersani has never responded to the justified critique of 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' as helplessly sexist in its reproduction of phallic privilege, such that self-divestiture is something only men can achieve, since women have nothing to divest – even as the self-shattering capital of the sodomitical scene leans wholly on the established construction of female passivity as negative, paying no tribute to this position, and constructing self-shattered *masculinity* instead as that which dips into the realm of the object (as 'survivable suicide') the better to strengthen its potency in the field of the symbolic (not unlike Carville's take on the green wound).⁶⁷ Anecdotally, my own attempts to discuss the knotty issue of sexism in Bersani tend to be met with a sense that this question is not important to the greater discursive structure of queer theory, but such a response is wrong if self-shattering is – as Bersani's art theory would indicate – intended as a universally human event available to every socialised subject, and aimed at undoing dominant power structures within Western society and pedagogy. If this is the case, and self-*jouissance* is more than a rhetorical figure gifted to male subjects in queer theory, non-male subjects have an equal right to it, and, while it would be unhelpful to label those voices excluded from the original image of self-shattering as *subalternised*, the kind of exclusion involved does reproduce the exclusivity of the 'socialised self' Bersani disputes. This is because it is modelled on the presumption that the subject is male – and, discursively speaking, the subject *is* male; the subject of Lacan, Freud, and Bersani is male, the subject of Irish Studies is probably male, and the citizen of Ireland is most certainly male (more on this presently). I am not, of course, speaking literally, but rather of the configuration of subjectivity as a representative category which is always already male; a presumption made visible

by Bersani's insistence, at least initially, on andocentrism, and problematised by the very limits this would impose.

One way to challenge this is to propose an equal degree of emphasis on female subjectivity, but such a proposal awkwardly foregrounds the dominant arbitrations of 'subjectivity' as a category, potentially resorting to essentialisms which do not recognise themselves as strategic. Another, popular and vaguely Kristevan position, would be to invoke embodiment itself as a feminine issue, and while this has much discursive purchase, it is not what I am hoping to rhetorically approximate here. My move to argue, in the first, for the paradoxically productive positivity of the *sinthome* as a figure for *jouissance* and revised relational logics and, in the second, for the decidedly feminine extension of this within Irish culture, will begin by dealing with a specific manifestation of gender proscription in contemporary Irish identity politics. This is the issue of reproductive choice, made current by a series of medico-legal convulsions in the public sphere and pertaining, in a highly ambiguous way, to the increased legislative and cultural Europeanisation of Ireland, if only because it offers a stark example of Irish (exceptional) deviation from broadly European norms. A number of recent cases, including revelations of the extent to which symphysiotomy was practiced by Catholic medics, charges of fatal malpractice in the care of pregnant migrant women, and a claim by the United Nations' human rights committee that Ireland's anti-abortion policy reduces its women to 'vessels', have underlined the degree to which the biopolitical aggression signalled by a continued refusal to legislate for abortion intersects with the construction of women as othered by, outside of, or subject to intimate regulation by, the state.⁶⁸ If woman, 'metonymized as nothing but the birth-canal', is 'the most primitive tool of nationalism', literal birth canals have become the focus of an anxious emphasis on national purity: since the lifting of a ban on information, it is legally acceptable for Irish women to travel abroad for abortions, but not to procure one in Ireland.⁶⁹ The visibility of non-Irish victims of both anti-abortion legislation and obstetric violence adds a

further level of complexity to this, since questions of the degree to which legislative happenstance or racial prejudice have contributed to fatal instances of obstetric complication in several cases is an issue which intersects, in turn, with the Twenty-Eighth Amendment (2004).⁷⁰

According to John A. Harrington, this constitutional ruling – which, following a campaign profiled as overtly racial and backed by a coalition government, denies automatic citizenship to children born of non-Irish mothers – articulates a response to increased structural Europeanisation by subtending an implied commitment to border control and racial supremacy. It may be seen, then, as the underside to a broadly positivist move in favour of increased cosmopolitan integration backed, variously, by Ireland's main political parties, by Richard Kearney's *Post-Nationalist Ireland* (1994), and even by Seamus Heaney, who intervened to explicitly support the Lisbon Treaty of 2009. A video clip of the poet reading 'Beacons at Bealtaine' also insists on 'our honour and identity as Europeans', whilst a statement in favour of the Treaty effects a poeticising of federal bureaucracy which has become popular in the discourse of transcendent Europeanism, and presents the EU itself as a culturist phenomenon: 'I think it [cultural enmeshment in the EU] is slightly more important [than economic issues], not only in terms of culture but in terms of credit, in terms of meaning'.⁷¹ To ask whether abortion is included in this is neither irreverent nor irrelevant; rather, the ways in which such unpalatable matter is enmeshed in this apparent transition from tribalism to cosmopolitanism, in the context of a culture long subject to the impositions of a religious hegemony which took the life of the body as one of its main regulatory tenets, is of crucial significance. Late capitalist biopolitics do not rescind this regulatory impetus, but alter its extension, and the inclusion of a racial element, here, constitutes a refinement and not a relinquishment of control. Chapter Three will deal more thoroughly with biopolitics, with emphasis on where the post-independence legacy of carceral institutionalisation comes into this, but for now it is necessary to make clear precisely how I feel this local quirk of postmodernity (that is, denial of abortion provision in a putatively European

state) relates to or complicates the operations of the *sinthome*, of symbolic decomposition, and of self-*jouissance* as these have been sketched above.

Put simply, this comes down to ideas of *privacy* and *opacity*, of the non-translatable and non-disclosive ontological integrity of shattered ‘self’-hood, as these issues may be read in tandem with the perceptual scene of strategic essentialism in national culture. That it can be presented as such is, incidentally, a boon of late modernity, the symbolic register of which moves away from atavistic insistences on, for instance, the purity of Irish womanhood, to focus instead on the demand for transparency inherent in a culture of increased biopolitical instrumentalisation. This also means dispensing with what might have been an obvious starting-point – ‘motherland’ as a category strategically essentialised through recourse to environmental imagery, the Shan Van Vocht, or Cathleen Ni Houilhan – in favour of a figure which is arguably less familiar to Irish anti-abortion activism than that of North America: the foetal citizen. While foetal imagery has been used as propaganda in Ireland for some time, it is by placing the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act (2013) next to the forced caesarean section undergone by an alleged rape victim in 2014 that the symbolic centrality of this figure can be appreciated in an Irish context.⁷²

In the first, exchanges between the internal space of the uterus and the representative spaces of the public realm form part of an established socio-political apparatus:

The management of women’s reproductive capacity is also a management of social space. Women’s bodies are represented in public forums as to be regulated, and their organs are opened to scrutiny for discourse on proper reproductive management. These spatial effects are coextensive with the semiotic effects of the discourse created. The practices that make images of fetuses, organs, and cells

possible create medicalized spaces around women's bodies that are critical for linking the prenatal to the public in an integral, material way

– and also for rendering this prenatal space putatively 'visible', via the marshalling of, representative or symbolic rather than realistic, signs for it, and thus subtending the exploratory function of the gynaecological speculum.⁷³ This practice finds its symbolic apex in the free-floating foetus which, exposed at first by ultrasound photography but altered, usually, to evacuate or finally 'disappear' the materiality of the body in which it is suspended, comes to register, not a single individual, but 'rights-bearing Enlightenment man': the *idea* of the citizen- individual, of the future of the race, as configured as always implicitly male, white, and able-bodied.⁷⁴ The foetus carried by 'Migrant Y' was deemed, in accordance with the terms of the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act, to be of equal socio-political and biological value to that of its mother, and ultimately – according to information made public by the Health Services Executive – legally privileged when the woman involved began a hunger strike. Without wanting to exploit the suffering of this individual, or the play down the complexities of the case as it unfolds, it is worth highlighting because it represents a remarkably literal example of foetal citizenship; one which registers a shift in motivation with regards to Irish anti-abortion sentiment.

What I mean to say here is: while opposition to contraception by the Catholic Church in 'de Valera's Ireland' nominally centred around a desire to prohibit mechanical tampering with 'natural' conception, effectively reducing the role of women to that of reproducers, a latter-day pose of concern for the foetal citizen appears to constitute a secular departure from this. The main organs of anti-abortion lobbying in Ireland are avowedly Catholic, but the centrality of the foetal citizen now supplants an unpopular argument against women's liberation by laying emphasis on the rights-bearing citizen, an emblem of Enlightened Republicanism rather than atavistic religion, as a figure towards whom the productive bodily capacities of women are hostile.

As with the discourse of reproductive regulation and exposure outlined above, this involves an insistence on impossible or fantasy transparency, ideologically effacing the female body in lieu of literally effacing it; although, in the case of a caesarean section without permission, the literal overriding of intervening bodily matter is at the centre of it. Women in Ireland do not have a civil right to veto any medical intervention when they are pregnant, ensuring that this paternalist instrumentalism is legislatively sound.⁷⁵ It is also, perhaps, still reflexively eugenicist: at least one promotional pamphlet released by the anti-abortion Life Institute, in ostensible support of the premature baby which resulted from ‘Migrant Y’s’ intervention, features a stock photograph of a white infant; a elision which, given ‘Migrant Y’s’ non-European ethnicity, unwittingly obscures the irony that this child does not hold any legal entitlement to Irish citizenship. This, too, extends into the realm of ‘landscape as inscape of national identity’, as a visual field presenting symbols and legible linkages which mediate ideas about the national community and the body politic. The government drive to endorse the Citizenship Referendum in 2004 aimed at exploiting a sense of what Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh have described as ‘crisis racism’, with supporters presenting anecdotal (visual) evidence of crowding at Irish maternity hospitals by non-white, and specifically African, mothers in lieu of any statistical information.⁷⁶ In each of these instances, *imagery* is essentialised as knowledge, with the result that female and/or non-national agency is negated in the interests of a biopolitical anxiety centring on the preservation of masculinised citizenship; authority is granted to structures of social observation and organisation which occlude the experiences of a portion of the population. That dialectical claims for bodily autonomy – processed as threats to symbolic citizenship – should be interpreted as ‘divergent, dissonant, negative’ is a structural prerequisite of this, since medical-legal refusal to legislate in favour of choice is, ultimately, the result of a paucity of *identification*; an inability, on behalf of the symbolic structures of the state, to engage with femininity as subject rather than object.

Is it possible to oppose this with *kritik*? Figures for subversive female agency in Irish culture have been posited before. We might think of the Sheela-na-gig, a Medieval grotesque with distended pudenda often read as a primitive fertility goddess or as proof of an ancient regard for the feminine; an interpretation which tallies loosely with evidence for goddess cults across the world, but bears little relation to the conventional positioning of Sheelas in locations which suggest a defensive or repellent function. Vivien Mercier links the Irish Sheela with an ambivalent relation towards sexuality that erupts, as in the traditional wake, as carnivalesque:

The Sheela-na-gig symbolically reveals to us a universal truth of which the Irish, as perhaps the most archaic and conservative people in Western Europe, have never lost sight. Sex implies death, for if there were no death there would be no need for reproduction. Besides, man has always found woman terrifying as well as alluring. The psychoanalysts say that this is because the female sex organ always suggests castration to him, as well as that first cruel expulsion from a nine-month paradise.⁷⁷

Mercier does not dwell, beyond this, on any association between the Sheela-na-gig and reflexive Freudianism; if the grotesque presents the possibility of castration it is, presumably, as a victim of it, and not as an instigator of castration via *vagina dentata* or any metonymic equivalent. That the wound of castration is a sign for lack enjoins a degree of materiality, then, in the Sheela-na-gig, which sustains a contradiction in the form of a lack which is also recoded as phallic. In deflecting entry to an edifice or averting the 'evil eye', this figure both forecloses on the privileged right of penetration identified, by Pierre Bourdieu, as an appendage of masculine bodily hexis, and usurps this authority; a revision made more significant by the accident of Anglicisation through which the origin of *gig* in either *gcíoch* (breasts) or *gcíob* (buttocks) is made unclear.⁷⁸

Without meaning to suggest that the Sheela-na-gig was ever intended to be male or unisex, it is worth considering the suggestive resonance of this reorganisation, whereby the menacing energies of the wound of castration shift or are dispersed, a movement that capitalises on the destructive capacity of signs for lack relating to bodily orifices. These signs are also entry points into the body's internal environment, a zone which political economy, via, among other impulses, the demand for transparency implied by the foetal citizen, attempts to territorialise but cannot finally account for since this site is also the irreducible locus of the Real. As Žižek's adaption of Lacan implies, the bodily self – the gazing self which stages a perceptual intervention into the signifying regime – is experienced as something like a break in the ideological order; a hole or cut (a wound or stain) analogous to the *sinthome* and experiencing the *sinthome* as *jouissance*. In the Sheela-na-gig, the vaginal connotations of a wound that is also a space, a figure connoting non-meaning, non-entry, and non-disclosure so vehemently it takes on the distended or 'idiotic' materiality of the grotesque, are writ large, which is why I have included it here as a pole of extremity in the symbolic economy of Irishness.

The green wound has been almost-theorised by Lloyd. *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity* (2011) is concerned in a large part with the mouth as a figure overcoding Irish bodies and, moreover, inchoate ideas of a body politic athwart the current dispensation. Past forms of social congress and knowledge, alongside the excessive grief which follows cultural annihilation, are 'encrypted' in a national culture which must cast out those recalcitrant energies that would compromise, to speak literally, Ireland's ascension to the 'world stage' of globalisation via state capitalism; as such, this mouth metonymises Irishness-as-loss and Irishness-as-*jouissance*:

The labile, wailing mouth of the Irish, the metonymic locus of their unruly desires, closes on the incorporation, the entombment, of a loss it dare not name

for fear of waking the banished dead [...] The afterlife of silenced or diverted grief appears everywhere [...]

Where Lloyd overlooks an opportunity to take the metaphor of an uncanny cavity to its most physiological conclusion is in his early attempt to reconfigure orality as phallic:

The mouth organizes the perception and articulation of the Irish body to an unremarked but nonetheless striking extent, as for psychoanalysis the penis organises psychic comportment both temporally and in terms of the spatial distribution of the apperceived body. Likewise, and like the penis in its symbolic status as the phallus, the mouth performs a double role, being the site simultaneously of actual practices and of symbolizations through which the motions and functions of the other members or organs are endowed with meaning.⁷⁹

Such aspirational insistence on native dissent as active and phallic in the context of postcolonial culturism obscures the symbolic bodily mapping that might have been, had the ubiquitous figuration of the colonial subject as feminised and subject to forced entry, as well as Lloyd's own model of the incorporated crypt or tomb of 'indigent sublimity', been conceded to in the development of this trope.

'Is the Rectum a Grave?' is significantly shaped by its moment of production; nonetheless, its early attempt to restructure psycho-somatic comportment around the anus may be introduced to usefully complicate the variously ejaculative/hollow/sealed/unseemly Irish mouth. If nothing else, it repeats the question: why phallic? Why not vaginal, why not anal? These abjected cavities harbour symbolic histories and psychoanalytic inscriptions too, and most of

these are defined by lack, regression, and suppression, making them, arguably, more suited to the excremental echoes of at least two socio-historical phenomena labelled ‘recalcitrant’ and therefore ideologically proximate to orality by Lloyd: indigent sublimity and the kitsch. A reading of Beckett in *Anomalous States* is wholly open to the lens of an ‘excremental vision’ and describes those amorphous, fragmented arcana excised from the assimilatory project of normalising nationalism, including the Irish ‘mother tongue’, as ‘backward [projections]’; undifferentiated shadows legitimating the linearity and apparent universality of enlightenment.⁸⁰ Gender politics are read as explicitly central to the project of pedagogical nationalism:

[Proponents of the Young Ireland movement] were mostly raised and educated in English and were hence obliged to graft themselves back on to a Gaelic past in order to claim it as their proper heritage. This backward movement has double-edged consequences: on the one hand, the paternal language, like the paternal heritage which it represents, becomes a sublimated ideal; on the other, the actual Gaelic language, still current even if culturally embattled, is projected as a lost mother-tongue which is at once natural and in need of supplementation. Irish nationalist writings inaugurate a subtle but decisive shift from the recognition of the economic and political threat that Gaelic culture faces from British imperialism to the representation of that culture as lost, past, primitive, fragmented and, indeed, feminine.⁸¹

Acknowledging the prosaically economic reasons for dispensing with Irish would implicate a ‘bourgeoisified’ nationalism in its loss, and, as such, the phenomenon is accorded an atavistically feminine status whose irreconcilability to the superstructures of state-formation is self-generated and self-evident. The national subject, conceived of as a son (Young Ireland) entering into the logocentric order of the father, is thus obliged to escape the trappings of a devouring imaginary

emblematised by a female figure. To point out that this figure has been represented as a keening crone, a sow that eats her farrow, the batlike soul of immanent incomplete self-realisation, would be to rehash many decades of feminist commentary: my justification for revisiting it is to ask, as of the kitsch, what gains may be made from a still more lateral approach – one which would embrace the peculiar bleakness of this figure instead of compensating for it.

Bersani's self-shattering sodomitical scene relies on the symbolically submissive non-subjectivity of the passive (feminine) participant; this should not be interpreted as pornographic so much as pertaining to what Bourdieu calls *bodily hexis*, or 'political mythology realized, *embodied*, turned into a permanent disposition'. Heteronormativity is organised in this way:

Male, upward movements and female, downward movements, uprightness versus bending, the will to be on top, to overcome, versus submission [...] are always sexually overdetermined, as if the body language of sexual domination and submission had provided the fundamental principles of both the body language and the verbal language of social domination and submission.⁸²

Ann Cahill has expanded on this, critiquing Michel Foucault's commitment to erotogenic sexuality by highlighting the latter's failure to account for feminine hexis, not only as mechanically available for penetration, but as *defined socially by its capacity for penetration*; as characterised, in the public realm and representationally, as penetrable.⁸³ This has implications for the *sinthome* since this figure, like the kitsch, is something one must 'get into', running the risk of coming up against the devouring semantic opacity or idiocy of non-identity, of the feminine as 'dark continent', or of the ideological remainder as material mass – of the 'green wound', abject but enjoyable. The voice (the mouth) has a privileged place in this economy, with Lacan's example of *lalangue* and many of Žižek's instances, especially, of sintho-matic cinema involving

the uncannily alienated excesses of vocalisation; as Adriana Cavarero points out, pure vocalisation has often been associated with ideas of the primitive feminine.⁸⁴ It is worth saying that I do not invoke this primitive feminine, or even the recalcitrant orality of Lloyd's analysis, to 'retool', as Carville would have it, rhetorical gestures which shore Irish 'fragments' against inauthenticity: I wish, instead, to stay the moment of its irresolvable opacity. It is also worth saying that there exists an especially flamboyant example which models precisely this.

Little comment, let alone scholarship, exists on *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* (1959), a Disney production which charts the exploits of a wily Irish caretaker and his wilier leprechaun. If cited at all, this film usually serves as shorthand for a static vision of paddywhackery – a 'hapless venture' reliant on 'folksy local colour' to achieve its desired effect of 'telling an Irish story'; one which, considering that the Irish Folklore Commission attempted with some passion to reroute Disney away from the leprechaun narrative, was always perceived as damaging to the national image.⁸⁵ 'Local colour' is inaccurate in the case of *Darby O'Gill*, which is set in simulacral enclave of 'Ireland' but filmed on a Californian ranch; as such, one might offer 'localised colour', an agglutination of perceptual events put to the service of concretising ideas about Irishness in the context of a rendered microclimate. *Climate* is important to this film, not only because it is set in a crepuscular west of Ireland, but also because its best-known effect of 'colour' is a green screen banshee, what the director Neil Jordan has described as 'a magnificent green creature who would appear in the Irish landscape at night and howl', and whose manifestation in the otherwise matte scene of *Darby's* set is 'truly frightening'.⁸⁶ She is also a gauchely green wound.

Cleary has suggested that supernatural cinematic representations of Ireland which present magic as infusing 'the out-of-door spaces of the landscape itself', might constitute an Irish variant on magic realism, albeit one denuded of political intent.⁸⁷ Disney's banshee might be further mined for meaning *as* a special effect, inheritor to the anxious re-enchantment of earlier

technologies like the magic lantern or the stereoscope. Selina Guinness compares the instructions laid out in Charles Johnston's *Ireland through the Stereoscope* (1907) to the visualisation practices of a theosophical séance, and the Marian apparition at Knock in 1879, which Cleary speculates may be the first instance of cinema in Ireland, can be historicised as a phenomenal-turned-polemical event fomented in the literal interstice between a group of witnesses and a lime light projection.⁸⁸ In these examples symbiosis is attained between the mystical and the mechanical in the interest of inculcating sovereignty. This is achieved through the construction of subject positions which are mediated in response to, or in dialogue with, landscape, and via a process of *affective alienation*: a phenomenon which, like alienated labour, requires human interaction but severs any sense of relation between subject and sentiment. It is located between the poles of mass-production and atavism, but not reducible to either of these: what ineffable, but substantial, *essence* becomes when it is no longer processed as enchanted. This is the force behind the apparent chemical purity of 'greenness' as a metonym for Ireland, and latent in countless cultural encounters with the natural world. Darby's banshee provides a brilliantly literal point of access to it because it filters the ambient grammar of folk psychosis through the plasmatic imaginary of an institution known for the 'rich and fantastic turmoil'⁸⁹ of its *monde renversé*. Sergei Eisenstein ascribes a quality of chemical purity to Disney animation, invoking 'an aroma without a flower; a taste extracted from a fruit; sound as such; affect freed from any purpose'; a description which also accounts, with vividness, for alienated affect, for post-symbolic substances as *substrate*.⁹⁰

Darby O'Gill's banshee erupts from a spectacularly plastic otherworld, and attempts to disrupt both narrative progression and heteronormative resolution, impeding, in her efforts to cause and herald the death of Darby's daughter Katie, an advantageous marriage to Sean Connery. Of course, this constitutes a gross misinterpretation of a folk figure whose legend largely survives among schoolchildren: the banshee does not kill, she only mourns, and, as a

supernatural counterpart to the keener, her cry restages a ritual performance of oral excess which, ‘far from representing spontaneous outbursts of sorrow’, rather ‘[mimics] the gestures of spontaneity in order to distantiate and therefore master the emotions involved.’⁹¹ The ‘wail’ itself is eminently open to mimicry; Augusta Gregory’s *Our Irish Theatre* interprets the commissioning of a keener to teach the cast ahead of *Riders to the Sea* as successful when a London audience ‘[goes] away keening down the street’⁹². A keener sketched in T. Crofton Croker’s *Researches in the South of Ireland* cuts ‘a most mysterious and awful figure’, but her ‘notorious’ howl is but part of a process that also includes versified verbal tributes to the dead.⁹³ Some of these are reproduced in translation, and hinge on refrain-like ejaculations similar to the tonic refrains of Mediterranean mourning laments, suggesting not only the status of keening as one form of ritual ululation among many, but also the highly controlled nature of a performance judged by bystanders like Croker to be savage or uncouth. At the same time, it is the simulation of spontaneity which defines the keen as a lament rather than a recitation, since its delivery is scaffolded by conventions for mnemonic purposes, allowing a standardised grammar of grief to be modulated at speed for local use but not, finally, attenuating the affective impact of what is invariably a female voice. Cavarero notes that several philosophers and psychoanalysts explicitly or implicitly *feminise* vocality itself, ‘[tracing] it back to the originary scene in which the fusional relationship between mother and child also works to frustrate the category of the individual’:

From this perspective – which is not at all far from Barthes’ notion of the “pleasure of the text” – the pleasure rooted in the acoustic sphere has above all a subversive function; that is, it destabilizes language as a system that produces the subject. Rather than stand in opposition to writing, as happens in the studies focused on orality, in this case, the voice stands in opposition to language, to grammar and syntax [...]⁹⁴

Darby's 'keener' does not possess a verbal script, and, in this at least, she conforms to the terms of the originary myth, in which the banshee is often manifest as pure voice, and her cry compared variously to goats, cats, foxes, dogs, hares, wind, and uillin pipes⁹⁵ – offstage effects which recall the island of strange noises and stranger stage directions. In other versions her wail is acousmatic, coming 'from nowhere' to take dominion everywhere, so that it is impossible to locate a stable source location; in these instances the banshee's voice *is* the environment, or at least mineralised in the environment, like that of Echo. This impression is reproduced in *Darby O'Gill*, in which the banshee manifests as a meteorological effect, composing, in one scene, from lightening, and decomposing into fire in the next. For Eisenstein, '[a] lost changeability, fluidity, suddenness of formations – that's the 'subtext' brought to the viewer who lacks all this'⁹⁶ by Disney animation; a desire, that is, for pre-oedipal or 'fusional' omnipotence transmuted, in *Darby O'Gill* at least, into an object of terror.

Lloyd has theorised the 'indigent sublime' as a form of psycho-social latency recalling the primary trauma of the Famine, and registering this spectrally as both the residue of dehumanised dead and of the occluded futures they, and the future state, might have bodied forth:

Haunting is the afterlife of that shock and it emerges, I suggest, no less in the collective and individual memory of those who live on in Ireland after the Famine – ghosts of the unlived and unworked-through past appear in oblique and unexpected ways in the material practices of a culture that is marked in largely unacknowledged ways by catastrophe.⁹⁷

Elsewhere, this immanence is registered in the 'runic' ruins of devolved industrial and domestic architecture, 'multifarious remnants of the disappeared' which remain as 'inert' but legible testaments to land clearance and dispossession.⁹⁸ Darby's banshee might be categorised as a

version of Lloyd's sublime: a highly oblique and unexpected manifestation of material-cultural residue, realised with the ludicrous force of the vengeful kitsch. In postcolonial mode, we might politicise her interruption as a literal Irish Howl – one which, as Lloyd parses the singer Sinéad O'Connor's use of non-verbal vocal effects in 'Famine', 'opens the uncanny domain where the human and the animal converge', registering non-identity. It is important, for my purposes here, to approach Darby's banshee as a material phenomenon and not an instance of magic realism; which is to say, as an agent of the dynamic autonomy accruing to forms and substances before and after they are fixed as signs. She exists as a residue of cultural investment made synthetically autonomous – *Darby O'Gill's* paratextual matter doesn't identify the person, if there was any person, who provided the vocals or figure for this character – and detached from any point of origin by *jouissance*: by the pleasure of a 'terrifying' special effect, of diasporic kitsch grotesque, of childish, or libidinal, enjoyment.

The uncanny domain of O'Connor's 'Famine' presents an 'acoustic image' which Lloyd identifies as recurring across accounts of the Famine itself: that of the 'motif of the wail' and its counterpart, an 'awful, unwonted silence, which, during the Famine and subsequent years, almost everywhere prevailed.'⁹⁹ The idea of an 'acoustic image' is problematic, since sound cannot be seen, but rather suggests, in its tonal structure, space: in this case, I would argue, *empty* space, 'landscape as the inscape of national identity' where that identity is conditioned by aftermath and the 'Irish Howl' becomes the sound of silence. In two examples provided by Lloyd this wailing develops into an aural incarnation of Benedict Anderson's 'complex gloss upon the word meanwhile', becoming 'general all over the valley' in Liam O'Flaherty's *Famine*, and rising 'throughout the country where neighbours gathered' in Thomas Gallagher's *Paddy's Lament* – these vivid but de-cathected events enjoin a sense of national community as soundscape.¹⁰⁰ This 'discourse' of wailing, which, for Lloyd, 'constitutes the very meaning of the Famine as a cultural rather than a natural phenomenon', may only imperfectly be described as a discourse at all, since

it is denuded – especially as it survives in J.M. Synge’s pseudo-keeners and Darby’s banshee – of the discursive complexity which would have inhered in grammar and syntax. This is not to say that original keens were not specific, but rather that the cultural object-event of the keen as Lloyd understands it here is representative: in each instance a single presence is self-alienated into the essential consensus of community and topography, meaning that, to paraphrase Eisenstein, this howl is a sound extracted from a mouth.

Conclusion

At several points in this chapter I have made use of the word ‘idiocy’, by which I mean, after Morton, a form of pleasure in meaninglessness; a libidinal excess. It is *idiotic* because it is irreducible to the ‘demand for totality’ Adorno would identify in non-dialectical thought, Negri in political economy, Žižek in an impossible psychological holism, and Bersani in the ‘socialised self’ of power structures – a self I have related above to the Irish citizen represented by the autonomous foetus but not by the woman whose biopolitical relevance is subsumed into this. I have not attempted to reconcile idiocy with a coherent program for social reorganisation or reconstitution, because to do as much in this context would be to risk retooling the rhetorical formation of fragment-into-wholeness Carville points to in certain areas of Irish Studies, and critiques as a reproduction of existing modes of interpretative totality. By repeatedly ‘staying the moment’ of congestion and excess, I have aimed instead at deconstructive contemplation, marshalling a number of new figures for rethinking Irish identity and relationality as these are reflected in cultural production – place-as-waste, symbolic decomposition, post-symbolic materiality, sintho-matic residue, and finally the abject feminine *as* sintho-matic residue. Lloyd’s phallic ambitions for the Irish mouth as a figure for resistance are dissolved in the ‘green wound’ of what heteronormativity (and symbolic economy) might interpret as shameful submission and

penetrability: becoming engulfed or ‘taken’ (terms with further purchase in Chapter Two) by an atavistically autonomous force which might be considered a substrate of strategic essentialism – that which remains and menaces, and is, in some more recent and deceptively objective developments in medical-legal discourse, metonymised by the abject feminine opacity and materiality that militates against a new kind of national ‘translucence’ or totality. In seeking to theorise atmospheric essentialism, then, I have in fact theorised the *aftermath* of this process; the leavings of atmospheric essentialism, and the ambivalent interface between the otherness of the environment and the otherness of the excremental, both of which are implicated in the poetics of peatsmoke. The remaining three chapters of this dissertation will not revise the writings of John McGahern as *idiotic*, as kitsch, or as deliberately enjoining any sense of the abject feminine; it will, however, attend to the ways in which inevitable (‘obvious’) concessions to atmospheric exceptionalism within the work, local examples of essentialised atmosphere within individual works, and related phenomena such as compositional arrangement, ‘painterly’ allusions to the visual, and textual effects operate in the work of a representative and immensely skilled and subtle writer of Irish realism. It might help if we begin by trading the word *idiocy* for *pleasure* – a gesture which both retains the sense of irreducibility (or irresponsibility) accruing to idiocy, and locates this effect on the body of the reader, the citizen, the participant; creating space for that extra-proscriptive potential each of my theorists, in different ways, locate in affect.

¹ Quoted in Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women 1900-1922* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2010).

² Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 5.

³ Leo Bersani with Tim Dean, Hal Foster, and Kaja Silverman, ‘A Conversation with Leo Bersani’, *October* 82 (1997), pp. 3-16 [p. 4], and Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 66-71.

⁴ Belinda McKeon, ‘Beyond Chronicle: The Deceptive Realism of John McGahern’s Fiction’, *American Journal of Irish Studies* 8 (2011), pp. 77-92 [p. 84].

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*’, *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 49-62 [p. 51].

⁶ *Ibid.*

- ⁷ Richard Kirkland, *Moments of Danger: Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 8.
- ⁸ *Ecology without Nature*, p. 67.
- ⁹ See Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 3, and Conor Carville, *The Ends of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 2.
- ¹⁰ Antonio Negri, 'Value-Affect', trans. Michael Hard, *Boundary* 26.2 (2009), pp. 77-99, p. 86.
- ¹¹ Richard Howard, 'A Note on the Text', *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. v-viii [p. v].
- ¹² 'A Conversation with Leo Bersani', p. 4.
- ¹³ Carville, p. 11.
- ¹⁴ Spivak, 'Nationalism and the Imagination', *Lectora* 15 (2009), pp. 75-98 [p. 79].
- ¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 201.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Lilliput: Dublin, 1994), p. 105.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p. 99.
- ¹⁹ Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 109.
- ²⁰ Carville, p.3.
- ²¹ 'Nationalism and the Imagination', p. 80.
- ²² *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 202.
- ²³ Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (Montreal: New World, 2012), p. i.
- ²⁴ Quoted in *Deconstructing Ireland*, p. 26.
- ²⁵ Fintan O'Toole, 'The darker side of 'Irelandis' was lost on us a decade ago', *Irish Times* 19th February 2011.
- ²⁶ Edmund Nagäle, 'Wish You Were Here: the early days of my photography', Nagälestock.com 26th June 2014.
- ²⁷ Morton, 'Imperial Measures: *Dune*, Ecology, and Romantic Consumerism', *Romanticism and Science Fictions* 21 (June, 2001), n. pag.
- ²⁸ Laura U. Marks, 'Immigrant Semiosis', *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*, ed. Janine Marshessault and Susan Lord (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 284-303 [p. 285].
- ²⁹ Ibid, p. 287.
- ³⁰ Spivak, 'Love Me, Love My Ombre, Elle', *Diacritics* 14.4 (Winter, 1984), pp. 19-36 [p. 22].
- ³¹ Lloyd, *Ireland After History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p. 100.
- ³² *Ecology without Nature*, p. 159.
- ³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 339.
- ³⁴ *Ecology without Nature*, p. 152.
- ³⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 51, 55.
- ³⁶ Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Cultural Critique* 31 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 83-109 [p. 84].
- ³⁷ Negri, p. 78.
- ³⁸ Graham, "...maybe that's just Blarney": Irish Culture and the Persistence of Authenticity', *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity*, ed. Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 7-28 [p. 28].
- ³⁹ Negri, p. 80.
- ⁴⁰ William V. Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space: A History of Spatial Illusion in Painting* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 228.
- ⁴¹ Paul Kingsbury, 'Did somebody say jouissance? On Slavoj Žižek, consumption, and nationalism', *Emotion, Space, and Society* Vol. 1 (2008), pp. 48-55 [p. 52].
- ⁴² Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991), p. 132.
- ⁴³ *Deconstructing Ireland*, p. 43.
- ⁴⁴ *Ecology without Nature*, p. 67.
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- ⁴⁶ Shelly Britvic, *Joyce Through Lacan and Žižek: Explorations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 15.
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- ⁵⁴ David Sherman, *In a Strange Room: Modernism's Corpses and Mortal Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 5.
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- ⁹¹ Harrison, p. 36.
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Place-World and Refrain:

John McGahern's Material World

Introduction

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is an early, perhaps proto-modernist, example of what David Sherman calls 'mortal obligation': in this a dead father, 'doom'd for a certain term to walk the earth', extends to his son a violent thanatopolitical demand which ultimately eradicates the family line. *Hamlet* is also at the centre of Joyce's 'Scylla and Charybdis', but mortal obligation in *Ulysses* is not, significantly, a matter of paternity but of maternity: it is 'the beautiful May Goulding', a 'corpsechewer', who returns as an animate cadaver to address her son in 'Circe', making manifest the guilt or *agenbite of inwit* which surfaces symptomatically throughout Joyce's novel. May also makes an encoded appearance in 'Scylla and Charybdis', and is woven into the very reference to 'peat smoke' which has been adapted to the critical terminology of this dissertation; *The Love Songs of Connaught*, by Douglas Hyde, has already been suggestively blended with her memory or residue as Stephen walks on Sandymount strand in 'Proteus'. This hybridised trace of both Hyde and May takes the form of what is sometimes known as Stephen's 'vampire poem', which appears fully-formed in 'Aeolus':

On swift sail flaming
From storm and south
He comes, pale vampire,
Mouth to my mouth.¹

– and which is an adaptation, revision, or citational reimagining of the final verse of Douglas Hyde’s ‘My Grief on the Sea’, itself a non-literal and rather breathless translation from Irish:

And my love came behind me,
He came from the South:
His breast to my bosom,
His mouth to my mouth.²

The most notable addition to Stephen’s poem is the vampire. Robert Adams Day has undertaken a detailed genealogy of this image, relating it to ‘Stephen’s broodings on drowning, menstrual and other blood’, to the hallucination of May in ‘Circe’, to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, to W.B. Yeats, William Blake, and *Hamlet*, and finally the black-and-white drawings of William T. Horton – specifically, ‘All Thy Waves Are Gone Over Me’, one of many *fin-de-siècle* images echoing the austerity of Katsushika Hokusai.³ The poem itself recaptures, for Day, ‘the moment [...] when a multitude of images from life and reading [...] begin to arise from the unconscious and coalesce in the mind, and when a poem’s demand to be born signals itself by some vaguely connected but repetitive ideas and an insistent rhythm in the poet’s head, clothed perhaps at first in silly or irrelevant words.’⁴ Noble birth, that is, in spite of ‘silly or irrelevant words’: Day is at pains to preserve the quatrain against the charge that it is, as Richard Bergam claims, ‘an example of egregiously bad poetry’, doubly contaminated by association with the Celtophilic silliness of Hyde.⁵ This sense of compromise at bad ethnocentric art anticipates Belinda McKeon’s defensive sentiments about McGahern and Irish obsessions, since it is necessary that Joyce, for these critics, be distanced from a kitsch manifestation of national identity. David Lloyd’s reading is more positive; in *Anomalous States*, he sees Stephen’s poem as ‘a representation at several levels of the processes of hybridization as they construct the individual [subaltern] consciousness’,

metabolising the matter of cultural effluence to produce something which is both original and implicated in a turbulent history.⁶ As composed of random or autonomous matter circulating in the rarefied ether of Revival-era Dublin, in the highly sensate environment of Sandymount strand, the vampire poem is also – almost – a work of meteorological eroticism.

The vampire poem is an appropriate opening here, both because of these ambient elements – the poem’s neat insertion into the poetics of peatsmoke – and because the symptomatic matter of ‘silly or irrelevant’ tics out of which the poem emerges approximate *sinthomes* in their simultaneous attachment to ideology and detachments as scraps of affect enjoining other associations. For Lloyd, Stephen’s poem complements his emphasis on minor or abjected cultural traces as putatively authentic sources of an Irishness beyond strategic essentialism (an *actual* essentialism): I would, by contrast, point to Stephen’s bodily implication in the poem, which might be read as an insertion into terrible pleasure, especially since it is implicitly sexual. Joseph Valente has accounted for Stephen’s ‘homo-vampiric’ meditation on the love that comes from behind as launching him ‘upon a train of thought that bears him inexorably to his troubled relations with [Buck] Mulligan and their potentially homoerotic character’; even without this association, however, the inexorable approach of ‘bat sails’ on a bloody sea initially register May, and specifically her death: ‘Bridebed, childbed, bed of death, ghostcandled.’⁷ May is passive in her suffering but active in her role as a neurotic manifestation of Stephen’s guilt, at once intimate and political, at his mortal obligations as a son and an Irishman; faced with her hysterical apparition and sintho-matic chanting of devotional incantations in ‘Circe’ (‘O Sacred heart of Jesus, have mercy on him! Save him from hell, O divine Sacred Heart!’), his response – *non Serviam* – enters the lexicon of exile from the master-mistress of Empire and Apostolic Church.⁸ The one who *serves*, as avatar of this enslavement or of ‘the system that [makes] her a victim’, is ultimately May.⁹ Naturally, her gender impacts on this, and, while I will not be entering

into an extensive discussion of it here, it is worth entertaining the thought of the vampire poem as an instance of imaginative sympathy with sexual otherness.

To read the poem in this way means making the following connections: as a gendered death (of bridebed and childbed) sweeps over May in a wave of gothic malevolence, so the sintho-matic matter of ‘egregiously bad’ Celto-kitsch sweeps over Stephen, who reshapes into a ‘homo-vampiric’ poem that latently imagines what we might, emboldened by Leo Bersani, describe as a sodomitical scene. The Horton/Hokusai association invokes Aubrey Beardsley, *fin-de-siècle* decadence, and Oscar Wilde, a figure already flagged through reference to Mulligan, and to ‘Wilde’s love that dare not speak its name’; to this I would add the somatographic impulse to defensive orientation present in the very tradition Hyde is drawing on. This is visible in another Revival-era translation from Irish, by Augusta Gregory:

You have taken the east from me, you have taken the west from me;
You have taken what is before me and what is behind me;
You have taken the moon, you have taken the sun from me,
And my fear is great that you have taken God from me!¹⁰

– and also in the older form of the Celtic *Lorica*:

Christ beside me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me [...] ¹¹

In the 1970s, the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes controversially inventoried the effects of widespread schizophrenia in rural Ireland, placing incidental emphasis on defensive prayers with Lorica-like motifs, including blessing bedposts, hearthstones, and lintels, invoking saints and

angels as sentinels, or observing correct ways of entering and exiting houses. These, for Scheper-Hughes, present metaphorical extensions of a cultural concern ‘with bodily exits, entrances, and boundaries’, imparting ‘anxieties about penetration, loss, retentiveness, and vigilance’ with intersecting bodily, religious, and psycho-social implications.¹² I have borrowed the term *somatographic* from Edward Casey to describe a conception of space or place radiating phenomenologically from the motor functions of the body (mouth/south); anxieties at contamination and penetration vex or complicate the, largely positive, associations accruing to it, and flag its reflexively masculine status as a body which strikes out, moves, creates, and investigates – not, that is, one which is passively penetrated. We might recall Pierre Bourdieu’s account of bodily hexis from Chapter One, ‘[male], upward movements and female, downward movements, uprightness versus bending, the will to be on top, to overcome, versus submission’, and compare it to Casey’s organic and ‘dyadic’ structures for phenomenological involvement:

In keeping with its own ambidextrous proclivities, [the lived body] tends toward bifurcation [...], arranging its choices, directions, and movements as right-left, near-far, up-down, above-below, etc. Even as it acts to project a field of possible actions, my body closes down the prospect of unlimited choice [...] A spontaneous corporeal mapping or somatography arises in which, as on an actual map, meaningful alternative directions are available at each important juncture.¹³

Meaningful movement begins, then, with this representative, able and motile, body, which functions as an arbiter of value; the body *engulfed*, then, is the body threatened, perhaps masochistically, since this power of arbitration is overridden.

Schizophrenia, for Timothy Morton and R. Murray Schafer, pathologises many of the effects otherwise celebrated by ambient poetics – sound or colour ‘from nowhere’, physical and

psychical porousness, or the eerie agency of a sentient surrounding world – such that, in some such cases and effects, ‘we face a choice between a transcendental experience and a psychotic one.’¹⁴ Stephen’s intellectual reshaping of the vampire poem on Sandymount Strand, the instant in which the poem’s ‘demand to born’ from the unconscious begins to be satisfied, might be described by Day or Lloyd (or Stephen) as transcendental; Gabriel Conroy might well account for his epiphany at a window in the Gresham, summoning a stereoscope-esque survey of the necromantic west, as transcendental too. There can be little doubt, however, that May’s appearance ‘in leper grey with a wreath of faded orange blossoms and a torn bridal veil, her face worn and noseless, green with grave mould’, is a wholly psychotic event; one which ‘radically bisects’ the plain of reality in ‘Circe’ (abundantly fractured already) and discloses, if we relate it to the processes of atmospheric essentialising suggested in the associative engulfment of ‘My Grief on the Sea’, an important conceptual qualification:

Most ecomimesis wants to reassure us that the source is merely obscure – we should just open our ears and eyes *more*. But this obscurity is always underwritten by a more threatening void, since this very void is what gives ecomimesis its divine intensity [...] Even at the very depth of the illusion of rendering, there is a blankness that is structural to our acceptance of the illusion itself.¹⁵

Ambient poetics are contingent on this blankness in much the same way as nationalist ideology is contingent on libidinal investment and the non-identifying blankness of *jouissance*; an event of intense privacy and irreducibility. Like May’s irruption, it is temporary but potentially transformative. The green wound – a *sinthome* of ideological enmeshment exposing the ‘joins’ of this ideological structure are purely pleasurable, as operating only as the subject is inserted into it and ‘taken’ by *jouissance* – is at work in these sections of *Ulysses*: it is, once more, related in to feminine residue (the remainder of May) and spectrality (the remains of May); it involves a form

of alienated vocality (incantation), and it invokes ideas of violation or penetration which threaten the national subject with feminisation. Jacques Trilling interprets the ‘ineluctability’ of the themes of birth and origin in *Ulysses* as a form of semantic blockage or stumbling-block, ‘[as] if the mother’s womb – which one always wishes to be without a navel – arose here and there throughout the entire book, an uncircumventable representation that language would run up against and turn around’, a figure for opacity and dissimulation on par with the *sinthome*.¹⁶ This threat is dynamic, productive, and potentially ethical, fostering a form of relationality oriented towards otherness and not to the superficial unity of proscription: in a similar way, the pleasurable dissolution of ideological commitment in a *jouissance* which both subtends the pleasure of commitment and declares this pleasure to be in excess of ideology creates the conditions for relational revision. At its simplest, this means paying more, or rather a different kind of, attention to May, and also the detrital cultural impulses associated with her; conceding to the guilty pleasure of immersion as well as the contingency of *non Serviam*.

This chapter proposes to undertake a similar rethinking of Susan McGahern as a maternal figure for difference who registers structural injustice but also offers, in the writer’s later work, access to a textual form of ambient autonomy; in many cases, via the very self-alienating incantation employed by May. The association between Susan and May is not a founding tenet of the chapter but rather a productive example, and there are significant differences between them, particularly the ways in which each respective writer reimagines the mother-figure: it is difficult to picture the revered Susan erupting from the floor of a brothel, and her latency in a work like *Memoir* would equally benefit from comparison with Marcel Proust’s processing of the mother and grandmother figures in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Methodologically speaking, my focus remains on atmospheric essentialism, or the *strategic essentialising of atmospheric effects*: an impulse, as Chapter One has shown, with national overtones as well as a degree of psychoanalytic, psycho-social, or even modernist potential for the marshalling of enigmatic signifiers. Although it may

not seem immediately apparent, the theoretical program outlined in the previous chapter is of continuing significance here, in ways which are sometimes self-evident and sometimes subtle. To begin with, my meditation on *Rising Sun* and *Memoir* as ambient texts draws on the structuralist tools of Morton's ambient poetics, whilst the sections on decentred selfhood extend the conceptual mobility of sintho-matic symbolic decomposition established in Chapter One. An additional idea, that of the pleasure of the text, will be the substance that binds these together by directing attention to the subversive potential of *jouissance* to detach and vex ideology as the former manifests as imaginative absorption – a variant, as I will discuss it, on the engulfment outlined above. The broader contention of this second chapter can be summarised thus: the pleasure which legitimates an ideology but also potentially destabilises it, explored already in relation to nationalism, is comparable to the pleasure taken in reading a text *traditionally*; a pleasure which potentially destabilises traditional readings and facilitates the readings for otherness I am modelling here. This kind of reading will be the particular concern of the final section of this chapter, at which point I will return to those ideas of hexis, orientation, and engulfment signalled above.

2.1 *The Aesthetics of Redemption*

To begin with, what do we mean by *traditional readings*? In short, I am making use of this term as a necessarily less-than-adequate means of accounting for a tendency to conservative interpretation present in existing approaches to McGahern. In the context of a writer whose work has overwhelmingly been read *either* for formal skill *or* for historical relevance, 'traditional readings' fall into the latter category, and are typified by works of commentary by a number of critics who will be mentioned in the course of this dissertation, including Eamon Maher, Stanley Van der Ziel, Roger Garfitt, Peter Guy, and Michael J. Toolin. Not all of these critics have written

exclusively ‘traditional’ or historical analyses, and not all ‘traditional’ analyses are straightforwardly historical or historicist; in the case of Guy, Toolin, and Maher especially, this can take the form of a loosely humanist approach to the content of McGahern’s work. Furthermore, not all non-historical readings of the writer’s work – a category represented by scholars like Dennis Sampson, Fergal Casey, Anne Goarzin, or Dermot McCarthy, and characterised by a formalist, psychoanalytic, philosophical, or otherwise abstract emphasis on writerly skill – are without humanist leanings. Nor, finally, do I mean to devalue or dismiss the contribution of any of these critics to McGahern studies; it is simply necessary to flag the departure of my own work from an established mode of approach and to indicate that this is motivated by what I consider a gap in the critical canon. In particular, there is room for more deconstructive thought.

For the purpose of illustration, I will briefly compare two examples of what I mean by ‘traditional readings’: Van der Ziel’s ‘The Aesthetics of Redemption’ (2004), an analysis of *Rising Sun*, and a section of Joe Cleary’s *Outrageous Fortune* (2006) – choices which, among other things, expose the limits of my use of ‘traditional’, since one is an aesthetic meditation on form and the other is a Marxist account of McGahern’s contribution to Irish culture. Both intersect, however, with history in revealing ways, and declare, implicitly or explicitly, the limits of a quantal mode of approach that adheres to what Bersani has called ‘the culture of redemption’. This culture is linked to the socialised selfhood which would underpin ideology rather than question it, and is often manifest in humanist interpretations of art and literature. Consider this claim, made in objection to McGahern’s *The Pornographer*, by Toolin: ‘At the most general, we turn to contemporary writers for rich, challenging insights into the way we have lived, are living, or should live – or in order to see how we may live more fully.’¹⁷ Bersani would refute it thus:

Experience may be overwhelming, practically impossible to absorb, but it is assumed [...] that the work of art has the authority to master the presumed raw

material of experience in a manner that uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that material [...] [Such] apparently acceptable views of art's beneficently reconstructive function in culture depend on a devaluation of historical experience and of art. The catastrophes of history matter much less if they are somehow compensated for in art, and art gets reduced to a kind of superior patching function, is enslaved to those very materials to which it presumably imparts value.¹⁸

We might think of the aspirational symbolism of the thanatopolitical here, which interprets and qualifies death by omission. Cleary's critique of a certain consensus on McGahern takes issue with the pedagogical 'patching function' advocated by Toolin, by problematising the idea that McGahern's naturalist exposé of the quotidian catastrophes of mid-century Irish history constitutes a moral reckoning:

[The] logical corollary of a drive to expose the hidden vices of a society would seem to be a commitment to social reform and hence some interest in how some alternate or more humane form of society – one that would not be so disfigured by such vices – might be brought about. However, in McGahern's fiction there is no corresponding impulse of this kind whatever. On the contrary, the whole impetus of his fiction is, as already suggested, in the opposite direction: it is to evict history altogether and to discover a narrative form adequate to an essentially existentialist philosophy premised on the futility of worldly struggle and on the need to discover some inner authority and calm in the face of life's evanescence¹⁹

– itself a near-paraphrase of the controversial epiphany achieved by the protagonist of *The Dark*: 'One day, one day, you'd come perhaps to more real authority than all this [...] an authority that

was simply a state of mind, a calmness even in the face of the turmoil of your own passing.²⁰ Politically, the resignation expressed in this is obviously problematic. Telescoping outwards, however, and placing it in context, offers ways of reading it askew: might we consider Young Mahoney's passivity to be a *sinthome*? Chapter Three will attempt to answer this question; for now, it is enough to point out that, whilst this resignation reflects a troubling degree of passivity potentially legitimated by such conceits as 'living more fully', Cleary's desire for a coherent program of resistance effectively restates the patching obligations of the culture of redemption by making a different kind of demand – for anger rather than resignation. 'In short,' the critic continues, 'McGahern the socially engaged investigator of the secrets and lies of Irish rural life and McGahern the detached philosophical existentialist do not cohere in any satisfying way, and yet McGahern's admirers have never fully attempted to resolve this dilemma or even to acknowledge it' – a perspective which puts the burden of investigation and rectification on critical readers rather than the writer himself.²¹ This could be empowering. Cleary is not asking that McGahern amend his political projections, but rather that his readership acknowledge its failure to live up the ethical program it seems to inaugurate; a program whose short-fallings are subtended by humanist critical discourse.

Van der Ziel is one of the foremost theorists of McGahern's work, and his commentary is variously positioned in the historical/social investigator and existentialist/formalist category. 'The Aesthetics of Redemption' accounts for the plotless imagism of *Rising Sun* as an exaltation of 'The Image' itself, which McGahern has emphasised in his short essay on the writing process:

When I reflect on the image, two things from which it cannot be separated come: the rhythm and the vision. The vision, that still and private world which each of us possesses and which others cannot see, is brought to life in rhythm – rhythm being little more than the instinctive movements of the vision as it comes to life

and begins its search for the image in a kind of grave, grave of the images of dead passions and their days.²²

In Van der Ziel's analysis, the image is analogous to those objectal triggers to involuntary memory present in Proust, whilst rhythm relates specifically to verbal refrains, verbal incantations, religious ritual, and formal consistency, through which 'stressful experience' – what McGahern has called the 'totally intolerable' status of certain memories and impressions – 'can be made bearable' and reshaped into a consolatory artistic event or, as I would extend this, place-world, *affective locality*.²³ So far, so culture of redemption. There is a way of reading against this grain. It involves rethinking the joins and kernels of McGahern imagism and placing more emphasis on the reading process itself. It also involves, at least superficially, coming down on the side of philosophical/formal analysis rather than historical/sociological; *superficially* because it is both possible and necessary to bridge these two, thus responding to the challenge raised by Cleary. A recent reading of McGahern as Beckettian – in which the term 'Beckettian' is underscored by an awareness of its 'changing inheritance' – by Richard Robinson offers a foil to the apparent experiential holism of Van der Ziel's rituals. Where the latter's emphasis falls on the rhythmic harmony of material or objectal triggers in McGahern's realism, Robinson rethinks 'the conspicuousness of this material presence', summoned by domestic scenes, landscapes, and encounters with recurring objects, as metaphysically mutative: 'McGahern is preoccupied with how things may or may not persist as images when they are lost: he thus consistently probes the meaning of nothing, not just as an existential concept but as a perceptual process which takes account of vacated space.'²⁴ Examples include the human stain left behind by a confined corpse in *The Pornographer*, but also the absurdly phallic umbrella in 'My Love, My Umbrella' – a prop Robinson compares to a painting by Magritte, suggesting a degree of banally surreal opacity accruing to the everyday which I wish to re-emphasise here.

It is possible to somewhat historicise this ‘spacious nothing’, or presence-in-absence, by examining another of Robinson’s examples, the short story ‘A Country Funeral’. Eamon Maher describes this as McGahern’s ‘best’ story, and interprets its portrait of the return to the remote Gloria Bog by Philly, an oil rig worker who has travelled there, with his brothers, to attend his uncle’s funeral, as ‘a journey of self-discovery for Philly who begins to yearn for the simple life of his uncle, surrounded by a beautiful landscape and tactful, caring neighbours’, most of whom emerge from a similar mould to those of *Rising Sun*.²⁵ This is, of course, a textbook redemptive reading. Philly’s wheelchair-bound brother Fonsie, however, is less enthusiastic, remembering yearly humiliation when the brothers and their mother travelled from Dublin to stay with an uncle who resented their encroachment on his bachelor life: ‘He never liked us. There were times I felt if he got the chance he’d throw me into a bog hole the way he drowned the black whippet that started eating the eggs’.²⁶ This is one of several allusions which undercuts Philly’s, and Maher’s, sense of benign assimilation into a simpler world; neighbours’ polite insistence on Uncle Peter’s generosity in life are contradicted by the experience of Philly and Fonsie’s mother, an economic exile given little help by her brother, whilst occasional references to the ‘wild’ Whelan family who emigrated *en masse* to the United States further suggest a sense of social exclusion. As in ‘Faith, Hope, and Charity’, space is only created for the returned migrant after a death has occurred, and this ambivalence is not elided by McGahern, who elsewhere quotes the historian Joe Lee: ‘Few people anywhere have been so prepared to scatter their children round the world in order to preserve their own living standards.’²⁷ Appropriately, it is the belligerent Fonsie who experiences an anti-Proustian instance of altered or obscured memory when the brothers drive to the village of their childhood holidays:

With the exception of the huge evergreens that used to shelter the church, the village had not changed at all. They had been cut down. Without the rich trees the church looked huge and plain and ugly in its nakedness.

‘There’s nothing more empty than a space you knew once when it was full,’
Fonsie said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Can you not see the trees?’ Fonsie gestured irritably.

‘The trees are gone.’

‘That’s what I mean. They were there and they’re no longer there. Can you not see?’²⁸

Philly’s feats of affiliation by omission allow him to re-integrate into the community; Fonsie, who cannot achieve this, is sensitive instead to aporia. Robinson compares this instance to a moment in *Rising Sun* during which the protagonist Ruttledge, faced with the former site of a railway station, reconstitutes it in his mind like an ‘oil painting’ – another reference to visual art – and its relevance to historical readings of McGahern lies in its encoded caution against the revision of images *as* history. Images are, in such contexts, *supplements for history* or lived experience, especially where this experience is marked as biographical, as in *Memoir*. As supplements they enjoin a degree of quasi-substantiality similar to the giddy symbols of Chapter One, and become available through Romantic modes of metastatic consumption.

This is especially evident in ‘A Slip-Up’, a story whose concern with somatographic fantasy anticipates certain aspects of *Rising Sun*, particularly those multi-sensory and ekphrastic depictions of landscape in the round which repeatedly register the changing seasons in a vivid *Umwelt*. ‘Every morning since he retired’, Michael, the protagonist of ‘A Slip-Up’, accompanies his wife Agnes to Tesco in the London borough where they live, and enters into an elaborate fantasy of the ‘dead days’ of childhood, ‘when he walked round the lake with his mother, potholes and stones of the lane, the boat shapes at intervals in the long lake wall to all the carts to pass another when they met, the oilcloth shopping bag he carried for her in a glow of

chattering’.²⁹ As Agnes shops, Michael waits and extends his daydream to involve the reclamation of their farm in Ireland. ‘He’d been dismayed when he retired as caretaker of the Sir John Cass School to find how much the farm had run down in the years he’d been a school caretaker’: drains are choked, fields are rushy, hedges are spilling over, and, in his mind, Michael must restore the land and garden ‘task by simple task’. He becomes immersed in this alternate reality and is discovered, hours later, still standing at Tesco, shamed by what seems to be a lapse into senility. All of this can be refracted through an observation made in *Memoir*:

People did not live in Ireland then [the 1950s]. They lived in small, intense communities which often varied greatly in spirit and character over the course of even a few miles. Part of the pain of emigration was that the small communities they have left were more real to emigrants than the places where their lives were happening and where their children were growing up with alien accents.

‘There was a hidden bitterness’ to this compulsion; ‘but sometimes it was not so hidden.’³⁰ After Agnes has involved a local publican and his wife in the search for Michael, they couple must face into their habitual evening out in the knowledge that their neighbours and friends have heard about the ‘slip-up’. Michael feels resentful when the room cheers for him:

All the people were elated too on the small farms around the lakes for weeks after Fraser Woods had tried to hang himself from a branch of an apple tree in his garden, the unconcealed excitement in their voices as they said, ‘Isn’t it terrible what happened to poor Fraser?’ and the lust on their faces as they waited for their excitement to be mirrored.³¹

Maher's remarks on the theme of diaspora in McGahern's fictional and non-fictional work are typically, and problematically, oriented in favour of the pastoral, and come under the category of redemptive revision:

[McGahern] resented the violence that characterised many family situations [...] yet knew that the bonds of place and family were an essential part of the fabric that held society together. Irish emigrants, for example, could never look on their abodes in London, Liverpool, Boston, or New York as being real somehow and they resented the fact that they had been forced to uproot themselves from their homes in Ireland.³²

McGahern has indeed remarked upon this sense of unreality or spectrality in emigrants' lives abroad, but it is not certain that 'the fabric that held society together' back in Ireland is being cast in a positive light. In one anecdote, that of the 'young and spirited Clare labourer' encountered by McGahern during a summer of seasonal work in London, a sense of aggression is clearly evident: on hearing about excessive rain in Ireland, the man remarks, 'May it never stop. May it rise higher than it did for fukken Noah. May they all have to climb trees'.³³ Resentment, in his case, is aimed squarely at the very closed and ritualised communities Maher praises, and this sense of latent violence extends into stories of displacement like 'Faith, Hope and Charity', in which another young worker returns periodically to his hometown in Ireland, 'boasting and flashing his money in the bars'. In 'A Country Funeral', the Philly too spends big when he visits home, 'his own fever for company after the months at the oil wells and delight in the rounds of celebration blinding him to the poor fact that it is not generally light but shadow that we cast'.³⁴ This practice of performative generosity in bars is an effort at forced filiation, an attempt to include a community in this uneasy ritual of return, and foments resentment as a result, underscoring the outsider status of the spenders. McGahern is explicit on this score:

The [emigrant] boats were hardly better than cattle boats, and the boat to Liverpool did carry cattle in its hold. The trains were no better. Strangely, these emigrants were looked down on by the new elite that had done well out of independence: it was somehow their own sin and fault that they had to go into unholy Britain to look for work.³⁵

While Maher does acknowledge the oppressive nature of life in the Ireland McGahern writes about, there is little sense that this injustice played a part in conserving and supporting those communities and religious congregations whose enduring presence in the fiction is celebrated. It is possible to challenge this, as I have here, by providing some historical supplementation; this, however, works in its own way to subtend the culture of redemption's demand that art impart an explicit political position. As such, is of less use here than a more creative approach.

I have begun this section with reference to 'traditional readings', by which I mean, most broadly, those readings which would adapt the redemptive capacities of image and ritual in McGahern to a problematically authoritative history; one which insists on McGahern's realism as representative, and is not only less sensible of artistic nuances, but also of the otherness these potentially introduce into the field of realism and, as such, of history. The danger of this kind of redemptive reading of McGahern is quite specific: it risks revising the forms of organisation and regulation typically operating in the parish or rural locality as *ideological*, which is to say, it risks obscuring its aesthetic function in the context of cosmopolitan cultural exchange. Negri problematises a critical tendency to attempt to combat globalisation through localisation, arguing that proponents of the local over the global

construct a fictional use-value that they nostalgically oppose to the growing processes of globalization; in other words, they oppose to globalization a humanistic resistance. In reality, in their discourse, they bring to light again all the values of modernity, and use-value is configured in terms of identity [and territory].³⁶

Because the territory of what Toolin calls ‘postage-stamp Leitrim’ is *lost*, however, or representative of an order of reality threatened by modernisation and invoked as nostalgic, its value is abstract or an issue of signification. This association restates the *crise pléthorique* of Graham’s citational ‘Ireland’ and presents, for my purposes here, two dialectical options for interpretation. The first is that favoured by Maher, and comparable to Franco Moretti’s mapping of Mary Russell Mitford’s *Our Village*, a novel which, in Morton’s words, ‘recovers a sense of *Gemeinschaft*, of rich, satisfying human interactions in a world of significance’³⁷: *Rising Sun*, which ‘hearkens back to the genre of the rural sketchbook of community events and manners, as well as to the tradition of local-colour fictions’ has been described in similar terms.³⁸ This interpretation correlates to the way in which Moretti reads the intersection between Mitford’s sociological accuracy and the interpretative framework of her reader, and concerns the systems of geography or *mentalité*, of hexis and habit, underpinning the circles of life, work, and social interaction in *Our Village*.

Mitford’s neat stylisation of rural space, however – with its alchemical transmutation of the ‘rough circle’ of work into a ring of pleasure – is not *mentalité*, but rather *ideology*: the world-view of a different social actor (the urban visitor), whose movements duplicate the perimeter of rural *mentalité*, but completely reverse its symbolic associations.

The circle is ‘a simple, ‘natural’ form, which maximizes the proximity of each point to the centre of the ‘little world’, while simultaneously sealing it off from the vast universe that lies outside its perimeter.³⁹ It is also, as Sampson observes, a structural foundation of *Rising Sun*, which is unbroken by chapters but charts the passage of the seasons and the mystic ‘wheel’ of birth, growth, and mortality signalled more pessimistically in stories like ‘Wheels’. Ideology occurs at the point of interface between the urban subject and the rural hexis suggested in circles of work and play; between the reader of McGahern and the nominally extemporised textual event as redeeming act of mimesis. The second, alternative, means of interpreting ‘Leitrim’ rejects this mimetic claim, accepts the ‘rough circle’ as an *aesthetic* event, and acknowledges that the encounter with it is an *aesthetic* encounter – an encounter with that which is processed, with that which relates in this way to waste: a phenomenon of ambient poetics.

There is a way of reading McGahern’s consolatory imagism, the ‘world in which we can reign’, against the grain of a culture of redemption which would exclude rawer, abject, or problematic matter but fail to acknowledge itself as artificial.⁴⁰ Robinson’s presence-as-absence offers access into it, but it is ultimately a case of extending, to the point of instability, Van der Ziel’s investment in the recuperative image. Certain objectal triggers in McGahern’s work are unstable in their own right, usually because they are repeated or recur in different works, constituting a form of refrain but also complicating or destabilising this frame. I would compare this motif of repetition or duplication to the supplementary insubstantiality of signs for ‘Ireland’ in Graham’s analysis, especially since each citation of an objectal trigger suggests (after *Memoir*) a real-world or biographical precedent which is, as Robinson emphasises, lost. The oilcloth shopping bag briefly mentioned in ‘A Slip-Up’ is one such example. Here, it is simply carried by the young Michael for his mother, but in *The Leavetaking* it forms the centre of a harrowing anecdote retold, by the protagonist’s father, ‘obsessively often over the years’: this recounts this father’s childhood abandonment by his own father, a bar owner who leaves for New York and

does not return. As his wife and child await him, their money runs out, and degrading trips to the island post office in search of a letter become regular; at last, the mother feigns an unlikely epiphany, deciding the money must have been sent to the larger office in Derry:

We dressed, and she took the big oilcloth shopping bag, made up of black squares and red. She was excited on the bus. When they'd collected the registered letter she counted out how she'd fill the shopping bags: raisins, oranges, prunes, lemons, rice, smoked ham, caraway. She was like a girl again.⁴¹

There is, of course, no letter and no money in Derry. Returning shaken on the bus, the mother vomits into her shopping bag. Mother and son dismount, wash the bag in the sea, and go on to live in poverty until the boy is grown. *Memoir* revisits a scanner or spectral version of this story, placing Francis at the centre of it again:

For all her boasting, my grandmother never once mentioned her husband. Neither did I ever hear her son make any reference to his father, though later he was always pontificating on the filial respect and duty sons owed their fathers. There were rumours that my father was illegitimate, that his father was a bar owned in New York who had come home to marry the local beauty and returned to New York with the intention of selling the bar. The more probably history is that he was a small farmer or labourer who died soon after marrying my grandmother. Except for my father's physical presence in the world, by this time it was as if he had never lived.⁴²

McGahern does not say why the more scandalous history, presumably transformed into a story for the benefit of *The Leavetaking*, is less likely than the quieter one; either way, Francis's lack of

assured paternity allows this particular absence to make itself present in these two anecdotes of shopping bags, and also to buoy the writer's conspicuous degree of interest in affiliating himself with his mother's family instead. The linkages supplied by these vaguely interrelated instances across 'A Slip-Up', *The Leavetaking*, and *Memoir* enrich, destabilise, or simply complicate the objectal trigger of the shopping bag. In addition, they register the use of motifs in the writer's work, and especially *Memoir*, which functions as something of a poetic echo-chamber for earlier works, charging certain objects and instances with biographical significance just as certain, ostensibly biographical, objects and instances are revealed as citational or supplementary in turn.

Relevant to this is Van der Ziel's faith in the restorative power of the object-image as reflected in his quotation of Proust:

[As] soon as each hour of one's life has died, it embodies itself in some material object, as do the souls of the dead in certain folk-stories, and hides there [...] Very likely we may never happen on the object (or the sensation, since we apprehend every object as a sensation) that it hides in; and thus there are hours of our life that will never be resuscitated: for this object is so tiny, so lost in the world, and there is so little likelihood that we shall come across it.⁴³

The lead pipe of 'The Image', seen 'in terror or in laughter once', is one such object-image, and, like the oilcloth shopping bag, it is doubly overlaid with emotional palimpsests: does it impart terror or laughter?⁴⁴ Just as certain objects remain 'lost in the world', so too do certain meanings becoming opaque or hybridised where 'found' objects are concerned. This process disrupts the eidetic translucency of the image and foregrounds the, finally impossible, struggle to restore a lost image upon which life or memory would hinge; the writer is, instead, left with supplementary images of a potent but obscure nature, or, as Robinson has shown, with sudden awareness of

absence-as-presence. This is the reading which can be mobilised against redemptive, traditional, interpretations, and also against the problematic transition from *mentalité* to ideology partaken of via the consumption of feeling tone; at the same time, enjoyment is still a gateway to destabilisation, and the next section of this chapter will investigate enjoyment as *absorption* to the end of illustrating this. The short-falling Cleary identifies in McGahern's political stance is not bridged by a reading for eidetic opacity and, ultimately, sintho-matic disruption – instead, the very limiting obligation to read a narrative for transparent ideological projection is problematised. Just as it is readers who have failed to acknowledge the gulf between one McGahern and another, so too is *reading itself* the means by which we might begin to rethink this.

2.2 *The Pleasure of the Text*

Roland Barthes compares the pleasure of the text to the serendipitous *jouissance* of cruising, since the reader of the text, 'the moment he takes his pleasure', is akin to 'someone [...] who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter: *logical contradiction*'. The temporal lapse or suspension – the 'spending', 'coming', and 'being' of *jouissance* – associated with the decentred self as 'beneficent crisis of selfhood' in Bersani's analysis is linked with sexual openness and potential; in Barthes, the pleasure of the text is comparatively peripatetic, and productive of spontaneous '[sites] of bliss'.⁴⁵ Declan Kiberd, in similar terms, claims that 'reading [for McGahern] was indeed like sex: for the reader – much as the writer before him – seeks both to affirm the self and then to lose it in a moment of bliss', a moment of absorption or distraction or interiority, which relinquishes control, and can be capricious: 'As a writer he was genuinely and pleasantly surprised every time one of his stories found a reader in a mysterious moment of coupling, seeming at once arbitrary and predestined.'⁴⁶ To compare reading to cruising in the context of McGahern's writing is not, then, anachronistic:

‘I came to writing through reading’, he writes in ‘The Solitary Reader’, at a time when ‘reading for pleasure was not approved of [in] the Ireland of the 1940s, when an insecure sectarian state was being guided by a philistine Church’ – the prohibitions and proscriptions of which are usually associated with sexual repression but linked, here, to the ‘pure’ act of enjoyment through literature. The young McGahern is ‘given the run’ of the library in the house of his neighbours:

There was Scott, Dickens, Meredith and Shakespeare, books by Zane Grey and Jeffery Farnol, and many, many books about the Rocky Mountains. Some person in that nineteenth-century house must have been fascinated by the Rocky Mountains. I didn’t differentiate, I read for nothing but pleasure, the way a boy nowadays might watch endless television dramas.⁴⁷

No ‘curb’ is put on this reading, allowing for a degree of promiscuity countered by later, orderly, readings at school.

The writer emphasises the ‘luck’ involved with this unconventional literary induction, but it is his descriptions of reading itself which most approximate the self-negating suspension of *jouissance* as it is described by Bersani and Barthes. Paraphrasing Proust, McGahern claims on more than one occasion that ‘[there] are no days more full in childhood than those days that are not lived at all, the days lost in a book’; his description of ‘waking’ out of reading suggests, as Sampson argues, ‘that the experience is a kind of hypnosis or sleep, or, perhaps, most of all, a kind of dream-state.’ The anecdote which backs this up should, moreover, be located ‘in the aftermath of his mother’s death and in the surroundings of his father’s volatility and violence’; such that its overtones of trauma may further substantiate the singularity of the experience of undifferentiated reading:

I remember waking out of one such book beside the sewing-machine beneath the window on the river in the barrack living room to find my sisters all around me. They had unlaced and removed one of my shoes and placed a straw hat on my head. Only when they began to move the wooden chair on which I sat away from the window light did I wake out of the book, to their great merriment. Now this happens only when I am writing [...] It's a strange and complete happiness when all sense of time is lost, of looking up from the pages and thinking it is still nine or ten in the morning, to discover it is well past lunchtime, but there is no longer anyone around to test the quality of the absence by unlacing and removing a shoe.⁴⁸

This story has a melancholic quality, especially as its implications spread out from the child McGahern to his siblings. A sister experiences cataleptic fits in response to her grief and fear, providing a pathological correlate of sorts to excessive absorption in reading, and sisterly closeness is emphasised in terms which imply a dissolution or expansion of selfhood – 'they learned to act together with more cohesion and solidity than was possible for any single person'. The sadder fate of the writer's brother is hinted at in similar, if darker, terms: 'He was both confused and spoiled, and eventually all the natural advantages of good looks and intellect that came to him so easily were thrown away, as if life itself meant nothing.'⁴⁹ Barthes's pleasure is figured as a comparable vacillation, since the reader 'enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss)'.⁵⁰ Young McGahern's reading is also not hierarchised: '[abolishing] all classes [...] not by syncretism but by simple discard of [...] *logical contradiction*', where the latter may be seen to relate to pedagogical direction. 'Sometimes I have wondered if it would have made any difference if my reading had been guided or structured, but there is no telling such things in an only life. Pleasure is by no means an infallible critical guide, W.H. Auden wrote, but it is the least fallible'.⁵¹

It is worth re-emphasising decentred selfhood in a way which makes clear the productive connections than can be drawn between this and Morton's inverted *sinthome*, the wound/space or, in this context, place-world. In the first, the somatographic origins of the place-world in Casey should be restated, since the role of the body in this economy of phenomenological comprehension is indispensable; in the second, Bersani's interest in the 'enigmatic signifier' of Jean Laplanche, a Freudian psychoanalyst, should be highlighted as an aspect of the decentred self which particularly implicates phenomenology. This signifier, located in early infancy by Laplanche and associated with momentous but irreparable encounters with signifying systems and emblems whose meanings are withheld or 'nonmetabolizable', is rethought by Bersani as a model for the recurrent phenomenon of encounters with otherness, with non-returned address, or with enigmatic address in the life of the adult. Early experiences of unmasterable events and indecipherable symbols (*symptoms*: 'I need to know the message, but I am cut off from its sense') produce a sense of 'paranoid fascination' which becomes part of the subject, but which may, Bersani argues, be deconstructed to more productive ends:

There is no way to escape this confrontation [with the enigmatic signifier], but there may be a way to rethink it – to rethink the constitution of the couple in order to move to a different relation to otherness, not one based in paranoid fascination but one that might use the masochistic element in the confrontation productively. As it is, the ego, in order to protect itself from the attack of the enigmatic signifier, becomes hyperbolically defended or armoured. But might this very threat to the self open the subject, leading to a self-extensibility rather than a paranoid defensiveness?⁵²

This would involve, in short, an orientation towards otherness, and a regard for self-extensibility as the root of a revised relational logic. This is not the subjectivisation of the objective world, however, but the objectification of subjectivity – a discovery of self within the world that does not reduce the world to ‘self’, but discloses the otherness of the extensible world as *part* of the self. It is contingent on the enigmatic signifier because this extensible world cannot be figured as a signifying scene, hypermediating information; its inherent otherness, its material recalcitrance, must be restored. Exposure to enigmatic signification replicates, in a significant way, the experience of ‘thrownness’ in Martin Heidegger; a condition stressed frequently in accounts of the philosopher’s conception of space and place-world, but perhaps underappreciated for its challenging or uncanny elements. *Being and Time* even detects a difficult ethical obligation within this encounter with the ‘thereness’ of the world, a concept Emmanuel Levinas signals with the grammatical figure *there is* [*il y a*]; this is a conceptual re-mark which gestures ‘out there’, not through the positive gesture of invitation, but by delineating otherness negatively – *there is*, but it is *not here*, not representable as a stable sign, but elusive, or akin to the Pentecostal alterity of *hic non est*. Thrownness is an encounter with worldly ‘thereness’, with the irreducible and impenetrable facticity of phenomenological matter and ontological pre-existence:

For the most part, however, [Dasein’s] mood is such that its thrownness gets *closed off*. In the face of its thrownness Dasein flees to the relief which comes with the supposed freedom of the ‘they-self’ [this is comparable to the socialised self]. This fleeing has been described as a fleeing in the face of the uncanniness which is basically determinative for individualised Being-in-the-world. Uncanniness reveals itself authentically in the basic state-of-mind of anxiety; and, as the most elemental way in which thrown Dasein is disclosed, it puts Dasein’s Being-in-the-world face to face with the “nothing” of the world [...] *What if this Dasein, which finds itself in the very depths of its uncanniness, should be the caller of the conscience?*⁵³

My concern, in Chapter One, with waste, mortal obligation, and the new forms of knowledge or relationality engendered by materiality have prefigured this: I am concerned now with arguing for a revised appreciation of McGahern's landscape, his ekphrastic compositions and place-world, as retaining a degree of otherness – *uncanniness* – in their own right. To do this, I will begin by analysing both *Rising Sun* and *Memoir* as *ambient texts*.

2.3 *The Ambient Text*

Rising Sun establishes a textual *milieu* via a number of mechanical effects, and especially via a form of tonal stasis accompanied or substantiated by an abundance of presences:

Close by, two swans fished in the shallows, three dark cygnets by their side. Farther out, a whole stretch of water was alive and rippling with a moving shoal of perch. Elsewhere, except when it was ruffled by sudden summer gusts, the water was like glass. Across the lake, at Jamesie's gate, a man had backed his tractor out into the lake and was fishing from the raised transport box, engine running.⁵⁴

'Ambience, that which surrounds on both sides, can refer to the margins of a page, the silence before and after music, the frame and walls around a picture, the decorative spaces of a building (*parergon*), including niches for sculpture': here, it also denotes that which is constructed as background matter but pulled, repeatedly and deliberately, into the foreground of the text.⁵⁵ The first time that this occurs, the protagonist Ruttledge has walked with his neighbour, Jamesie, 'between the steep banks of the lane', coming upon 'foxgloves and small wild strawberries and

green vetches'; they also come upon Bill Evans, an elderly farm boy, smoking with 'miserly ecstasy' amid flowers that double as references to tobacco, implying gradations of fragrance ('wild woodbine', 'burnished mint'). The narrative telescopes outwards, gaining in quantity, movement, and depth; water, again a vibratory medium, connects the banks of the lake in a motion doubled or echoed in the sound suggested by the running engine.

It is worth noting that two kinds of vicarious and virtual immersion are at work in this representative passage. In the first, that which Marie-Laure Ryan describes as 'a madeleine effect' permits prior experience to enrich the reader's impression of the scene by association; in the second, a subtler and more complex spatial gesture is enacted by language and form.⁵⁶ Just as the opening passage suggests suspension through its shape, the descriptive interludes interrupt narrative flow to affect an arrested impression of abundance or flux. No actual narrative time 'passes' in the course of these digressions; if the opening passage has *set* the scene, situating events in parochial space, subsequent passages reaffirm this siting compulsively, allowing the physical backdrop to 'ripple', 'ruffle', and pulsate in the contours of a closed eidetic frame.⁵⁷ Many of these descriptive pauses are pictorial: 'framed', concerned with surfaces, and tonally frozen or distilled. They are also delivered in a 'pictorial' manner, which is to say ekphrastically:

The fields long sodden with rain had hardened in the drying winds. Small flowers started to appear on banks and ditches and in the shelter of the hedges. Around Mary's old house by the lake, with the ash tree growing in the middle of the living room, hundreds of narcissi met the spring with beauty.⁵⁸

Ekphrasis occurs 'when a narrator says "picture this"', allowing for a static field of description that can be visual, auditory, or concerned with motor functions.⁵⁹ Although the term is generally employed to denote the description of visual art, its associations with interruption and

objectivisation mean that it also provides an adequate term of description here. Interruption slows or suspends; objectivisation externalises impressions to widen the world of the text, lending empirical sturdiness to its milieu, and developing, through an intensification of detail or vibration, a sense of atmosphere. In the midst of these ‘held minutes’, the reader is also held in a state of contemplation, during which an increasingly telescopic awareness of the surrounding environment is revealed without actually going anywhere. When Johnny Murphy, a bachelor emigrant, returns to visit the lake and encounters an old friend, the two men stiffen into ‘a burlesque of listening’:

In the held minute, the birds seemed to sing more furiously in their branches. Bees laboured noisily between the stalks of red and white clover. Cattle lowed down by the lakeshore. Further away, cars and lorries passed on the main road and from further away still came the harsh, heavy clanging of a mechanical shovel as it cleared a hedgerow or dug the foundations of a house.⁶⁰

In the course of this ‘held minute’, a barely-perceptible, and probably accidental, intertextual flash or gesture suggests the passage of ‘The Dead’ which was analysed in Chapter One, inadvertently suggested by *further away still*; a phrase which serves the purpose of emphasizing momentum in McGahern’s text. For McGahern, this is the only point in *Dubliners* at which the language ‘draws attention to itself’ as performative.⁶¹ ‘Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland’; in an instant, an emblem of national consonance and imagined community, the newspaper, is transfigured. There is no way for Gabriel to know whether or not snow is ‘general all over Ireland’, but the sense of compressed abundance – of ‘all the living and the dead’ gathered in spectral simultaneity – that characterises Joyce’s Dublin-as-necropolis is not only registered in this image but metamorphosed. National community is interchangeable with meteorology. This idea, moreover, finds a microcosmic mirror in *Rising Sun*, in which community

space is repeatedly reaffirmed through atmospheric events, travelling sound or ‘vibration’, and performative – or rather, phatic – speech; each of these declares and re-declares the closed milieu, charged with tone and atmospheric texture, and sustained as much by the interrelations between inhabitants as between landmarks, topographic poles and triggers, or boundaries.

Phatic communion is glossed by Roman Jakobson as ‘primarily serving to establish [or] prolong’ communication (small talk), to ‘check whether the channel works (“Hello, do you hear me?”)’, or to attract attention (‘Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears’).⁶² Morton expands these definitions, pointing out that, since they foreground *contact* over *message*, phatic statements are medial: ‘[they] make us aware of the actual air between us [...] They point out the atmosphere in which the message is transmitted’.⁶³ It is significant that in the context of McGahern’s literary ‘environment’, a space which has been cumulatively established over the course of his career, the rural *Volta* or turn towards an exclusive concern with the farming communities of Leitrim is conventionally located in the novel *The Pornographer*. This text marks a shift in focus, heralding the remote locations of *Amongst Women* and *Rising Sun*, and closing in a memorable moment of phatic excess. A character, Maloney – the ebullient poseur – stages a playful melodrama of despair by demanding answers from the road he is driving on:

“I’ve been watching the bloody road all my life, and it tells me nothing. Yoo-hoo, Road!” he suddenly shouted. “You see! It doesn’t answer. It just speeds past. Yoo-hoo, Road!”

Ultimately, the closing lines are islanded (which is to say enframed) by a gap of empty space, separating them from the paragraph above, and the subsequent ‘silence’ of ellipsis and cessation: in this, they also echo the visual layout of the closing passages of ‘The Dead’:

“Yoo-hoo, Road. Yoo-hoo, Road. Yoo-hoo, Road. Yoo-hoo...”⁶⁴

From *yoo-hoo* to *hel-lo*, then: the latter is the first enunciation in *Rising Sun*, and takes precedent in an anecdote about a guerrilla soldier, trapped and injured following an ambush by the lake during the War of Independence, who cries ‘hel-lo’ to attract attention tentatively, ‘afraid he’d be heard and afraid of his arse he’d not be heard.’⁶⁵ The idea of human and animal auditory blending is also introduced by Jamesie, who listens out for the cry of the cuckoo and turns his imitation of the soldier’s ‘hel-lo’ into ‘the high cry of a bird calling out of the depths of the bog’.⁶⁶ Kate suggests a ‘talking dummy’ to replace the stone statue of a soldier at the ambush site; it should, she stipulates, call out ‘hel-lo’ at regular intervals. The sequence which follows not only stages an oppositional gesture against the nationalist mythologizing – ‘Big blow. Big Show’ and a military march in lieu of any regard for local ambivalence – but also presents events in the form of a sequence of competing, medial, sounds. Distant drumming, the remembered ‘bawling and roaring’ of a bull, the remembered ‘hel-lo’, the reactivated ‘hel-lo’, a bugler at the gravesides in Shruhaun, the sound of ‘Cuckoo...Cuckoo...Cuckoo...Cuckoo’, and Jamesie’s personal retelling of events, all overlay one another, importing contradictory territorial claims.⁶⁷

The story of the soldier, and of the annual commemorative march staged by a local branch of the IRA, concentrates another motif of the text: that of spectrality, or rather of a Joycean awareness of departed multitudes (named and unnamed), marked by presence-as-absence. Allusions to ‘the crowd lying below in Shruhaun’ or to dead relatives can be rueful, moving, or even vaguely eschatological; ‘There’s been a big clear-out since young Reagan came round the lake in the pony and cart’, Patrick Ryan claims. ‘The country was walking with people then. After us there’ll be nothing but the water-hen and the swan.’⁶⁸ Kate and Joe Rutledge reminisce about the emigrating families they encountered when searching for a house; at Easter, Jamesie recalls a time ‘when this shore was black with people [...] Now nothing but the divers

and the swans.’⁶⁹ That fowl might take over seems appropriate, since the virulent singing of birds is registered, several times throughout the text, as an auditory hallmark of the lakeside area – their sonic omnipresence has apparently replaced much of the human connections (vocal, familiar, or physical) which characterised the ‘lost’ world of a landscape ‘walking’ with people. When challenging Rutledge’s pacifism, a character asks of him if ‘the birds and the quiet’ of the country are appealing; this echoes an earlier, near-identical, question about Rutledge’s motives for relocating to the lake from London. It also recalls an earlier efflorescence of ambient sound:

I hadn’t noticed until then that small birds, wrens and robins and finches, were indeed singing in the desolate branches. And at that moment, as if on cue, a pheasant started to call in a nearby field. No, it wouldn’t be to listen to the birds. They say we think the birds are singing when they are only crying *this is mine* out of their separate territories.⁷⁰

Phatic communion, as Jakobson points out, is a function shared by birds and humans: calling pheasants, wildfowl, robins, finches, and wrens declaring *this is mine* may be interpreted, playfully, as non-human equivalents to the territorial orality of the novel’s characters. The sexual predator John Quinn, whose verbal performances vary between sycophancy and menace, projects an alternate, poetically rendered, world for himself through mechanical platitudes; at Jamesie’s final appearance, he stands across the lake from Kate and Rutledge and calls ‘Hel-lo. Hel-lo. Hel-lo. Hel-lo’, in ‘the high cry of a bird mocking them out of the depths of the bog.’ The space they share, and with which the reader has become familiar, rises before the ‘gaze’ and imagined olfactory functions of the narrative fragrantly: ‘the night air sweet with the scents of the ripening meadows, thyme and clover and meadowsweet, wild woodbine high in the whitethorns mixed with the scent of the wild mint crawling along the gravel and on the edge of the water.’⁷¹ A milieu – static, repetitive, suspended between verbal and physical poles or boundaries – is felt as

atmospheric. The role of proper names ('thyme and clover and meadowsweet') in this process is an important trope in McGahern's later work; whatever the reader's familiarity with flora, these plants and trees have been encountered at earlier stages in the text, and their recurrence anticipates the mnemonic inventories of *Memoir*.

Between the poles of two mnemonic triggers in Proust, as Julia Kristeva claims, sensation appears to 'gush', substantially and dimensionally, 'out', transcending time and restoring memory *in situ* or alchemical suspension; the madeleine initiates 'embodied memory'.⁷² A similar 'gushing' physicality is invoked at the start of *Memoir*, courtesy of a representative lane:

There are many such lanes all around where I live, and in certain rare moments over the years while walking in these lanes I have come into an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace, in which I feel that I can live for ever. I suspect it is no more than the actual lane and the lost lane becoming one for a moment in an intensity of feeling.⁷³

Intensity, a plain on which all signs are equal and without gradation – silence, stillness, pure sound, all-encompassing weather – is also a leitmotif in *Rising Sun*. There are many examples to choose from but the following, an especially archaised and visual interlude, suggests something of the text's concern with opaque surfaces and primary colours:

The hard burnt colour of the freshly cut meadows softened and there was a blue tinge in the first growth of the aftergrass that shone under running winds. The bullfinch disappeared with the wild strawberries from the bank. The little vetches turned black. The berries on the rowans along the shore glowed with such

redness it was clear why the rowan berry was used in ancient song to praise the lips of girls and women.⁷⁴

This also anticipates the courtly primitivism of the painting that makes a brief appearance in *Rising Sun*, Giotto's *Flight into Egypt*:

Joseph with a bundle on his shoulder was leading the donkey carrying Mary and the Child. Against the deep blue of the sky and the pale hills hovered two angels with outspread wings and haloes of pure gold. The blue of Mary's robe was lighter than the lightest blue of the sky. The robes of Joseph, the child and the angels were as brown as earth. The trees on the pale hills were flowers.⁷⁵

With Rutledge, the reader is moved by this image, which might also be yet another expanding field of description contributing to the colour and texture of the lake community. The description complements McGahern's stated regard for spirituality as an expression of man's connection to 'his total environment' and moral life as the concomitant outcome of 'his relations to fellow man.'⁷⁶ Rutledge's encounter with this painting combines the two: 'The whole [of *The Flight into Egypt*] had an extraordinary and deeply affecting serenity: it was as if they had complete trust in the blessed light as they travelled to a place or state where nothing cast a shadow.'⁷⁷ If Rutledge's 'absorption' in the painting simulates the reader's absorption in tonal pause, Susan McGahern's 'voice' imports a similar sense of immanence:

On such an Easter morning, as we were setting out for Mass, we were always shown the sun: Look how the molten globe and all the glittering rays are dancing. The whole of heaven is dancing in its joy that Christ is risen.⁷⁸

Rising Sun is not a religious text but one which partakes of religious afterglow, gaining, most obviously, from the ambient effects of sacralisation, whether in the form of offstage bells which ring and echo, or of a profusion of soothing blues.

Dermot McCarthy has described Susan's appearance in the text as somewhat uncanny, but its significance – along with the several biographical strands and character studies of *Memoir* – is only established in retrospect; McGahern's memoir appears to command and impose control on interpretations of earlier works as it metabolizes them.⁷⁹ The events of *Memoir* occur in the same supplementary, ecologically abundant and metallic, milieu of *Rising Sun*; this is not Leitrim but, to borrow from Graham, 'Leitrim'. By way of illumination, I refer the reader to an especially apt artistic homage to McGahern's 'Leitrim', *Three Days in Summer* (2009), a short film by Ronan Gallagher which combines images of Aughawillan, Carrick-on-Shannon, and Ballinamore with recordings of McGahern's voice and the song of 'acousmatic' birds.⁸⁰ When considered alongside Susan's vocal intervention, a floating phoneme, this use of ambient and artificial sound to conjure atmosphere becomes significant: McGahern's voice, reading from *Memoir*, and Susan's voice, recurring as remembered speech or written word, are both examples of the vocal traces left, either mechanically or imaginatively, after death. What Barthes referred to as 'the grain of the voice' has been effaced, its materiality projected onto something new; in this case, audio recording and the printed word.⁸¹ McGahern, when recalling and reconstructing his mother's speech patterns in *Memoir*, is not causing Susan to 'speak' uncannily so much as reacting to a set of distilled recollections; in this, his approach is unavoidably active and generative. It results in a second or supplementary 'Susan' whose presence intimately underpins the architecture of the works' milieus. 'My mother named the flowers for me as we walked, and sometimes we picked them for the jamjars.'⁸² McCarthy interprets the final reconstruction of Susan in *Memoir* as a triumphant reimagining of the Orpheus myth, Eurydice restored; in 'The Image', however, McGahern himself describes literary style as a 'Medusa's mirror'⁸³. Mid-way, then, between the

figure of Orpheus, turning to fatally face the beloved, and that of Theseus, transforming horror to stone by turning its own image against it, emerges the additional, if accidental, Biblical figure of Lot's wife – frozen or ossified as punishment for turning back. If these connections seem whimsical, they are intended as illustration; 'Susan' is not resurrected but recast as an emblematic figure, a site of intense and arrested signification (loss, trauma, artistic expression, femininity, the natal, love), whose realisation in *Memoir* and, more latently, *Rising Sun*, is limited by this abbreviation, and survives as a series of surface impressions opening gnomically into silence. At the conclusion of *Memoir*, an emotional sequence in which 'Susan' is hypothetically returned to the posthumous and prenatal space of a lost and actual lane, McGahern imagines that mother and son 'would probably not be able to speak'.⁸⁴

The language of *Rising Sun*, like its inventory of images, differs from that of earlier works; the 'ungainly' sentences identified by Eamon Grennan as evocative of 'the organic, muscular, bodily nature of style itself' give way to polished, but sedate, pictorial interludes and balanced sentences.⁸⁵ There is some related significance, I feel, to the original title of *Memoir*, *All Shall Be Well*: although conventionally attributed to a prayer by Julian of Norwich, 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well', this quote is also associated with Saint Theresa of Avila, a considerably more familiar figure in Irish devotional culture, and in popular Catholicism more generally.⁸⁶ This partially, if not largely, due to Bernini's celebrated *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, a model of suspended sensuality and mystical masochism. In light of Cleary's suggestion of a latent masochism in the maternal figure of *Memoir*,⁸⁷ and with regard to Ignatius Loyola's (prematurely Joycean and abundantly literary) 'discipline of immersion' – manifest in the *Ecstasy* – the temptation to attribute *All Shall be Well* to Saint Teresa is especially acute, if mischievous; what is more significant still is the rhythmic manner in which this prayer is read or vocalised: 'all shall be well / and all shall be well / and all manner of thing shall be well'.⁸⁸ Whatever the unknowable index of authorial intent, and whatever Susan McGahern's actual

familiarity with Saint Teresa, the rhythm manifested in this pious fragment is structurally congruent with much of the remembered, reconstructed, ‘Susan’s’ speech.

‘In the beginning was my mother’, and in her wake is the supplement of the written word; when she dies and is buried in *Memoir* her young son, prevented from attending her funeral, times its ritual unfolding imaginatively:

The four candles were lit around the coffin under the sanctuary lamp. *Introibo ad altere dei. Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam* [...] At the end of the Mass the priests go to chairs at the side of the altar [...] Father McGrail faces the people and talks of the life she lived in the world [...] I cried out as I listened and thought the hands of the clock were about to stop.⁸⁹

Susan’s death takes place offstage and is reported by her husband with formality – ‘The children’s mother died at a quarter to three. May the Lord have mercy on her soul’ – whilst the repetition of platitudes is registered as maddening.⁹⁰ Almost immediately the rosary is commenced; during the burial scene, Susan is metonymised as her coffin and transubstantiated through a received discourse of sacralisation. Although the child’s cry is a passionate articulation against this process, the eulogizing priest actually prefigures the adult writer whose artistic vocation will reconstitute Susan McGahern in language – a phenomenon discussed by McCarthy as a form of Freudian ‘encryptment’ sustaining the loved one in spectral form until her death is accepted and emblemized.⁹¹ The Joycean echoes of the Latin *Introibo ad altere dei* are neither accidental nor deliberate, but inevitable, and through the prism of *Memoir* the writer’s career may be seen as a gradual appropriation of such logocentric authority – an accumulation of substitute father-artificers, from Joyce to Stendhal to Beckett to Camus, who are spectrally or inter-textually present in numerous works – with the ultimate outcome of reinstating Susan through controlled

and solid prose. This style encodes a narrowing of the distance between conviction and expression: instead of rejecting the authority of ritual, McGahern inhabits it.

One cannot unread *Introibo ad altare dei*: another mother, here, is ‘beastly dead’, and the equally contingent death of May Goulding provides a precedent to that of Susan McGahern; both women endured not only illness, but institutional neglect. Both women are also united by their common generation of a particular textual effect. Susan’s presence in *Memoir*, and that of her representatives in other works, is frequently registered by the use of devotional phrases which, in *The Leavetaking*, are compared to the text of the Catholic catechism:

When she would ask me, as she often did, ‘Who do you love most of all?’ I would answer, readily and truthfully, ‘You, Mother,’ and despite her pleasure, she would correct me.

‘You know that’s not right, though it makes me glad.’

I love God most of all.

‘And after God?’

‘Mary, my mother in heaven.’

‘And after Mary?’

‘You, Mother.’

‘You know that’s not right either.’

‘I love my earthly father and mother equally.’⁹²

For all of their earnestness, the mechanistic compulsivity of such phrases as ‘God direct us [...] He knows all. He can do all. In Him I trust’, ‘In Him and by Him and for Him I live and place my trust, and to Him alone I pray’⁹³ unwittingly approximates the ventriloquized piety of May:

(*In the agony of her deathrattle.*) Have mercy on Stephen, Lord, for my sake!
Inexpressible was my anguish when expiring with love, grief, and agony on
Mount Calvary.⁹⁴

We are not so far, in the final line of this quotation, from ‘all will be well’, nor from ‘thy, lord, wilt open my lips’; from the self-alienating structures of ritual, which essentialise rhythms and rites, and, in many cases, provide a blueprint for narrative structuration and refrain in McGahern’s work. Paradoxically, it is precisely this process of alienation which creates space for an ethical rethinking or revision of Susan facilitated, like the brief analysis of May which opened this chapter, by the liberating limit presented by the *sinthome*.

The most obvious difference between a *sinthome* and an enigmatic signifier is the overt presence of ideology. While a *sinthome* first seduces and then dissimulates, exposing ideology as contingent on enjoyment and, as I wish to suggest via ‘value-affect’, restoring a degree of agency to the subject seduced, the enigmatic signifier proposed by Laplanche and Bersani might be glossed as the inverse of a hyper-mediated sign – a sign which must, by definition, signal *something*, but which does not disclose this meaning, causing the subject to fall back on a gap in perception analogous to the shame of refused return outlined in Chapter One. On closer analysis, however, these psychic phenomena share much in common, especially as both register a trigger or impulse to interpret which is, at once, thwarted or short-circuited, presenting, if anything, the pleasure of being triggered – the pleasure of address-in-itself, rather than any interpretable or proscribed address; the pleasure of pure relationality rather than a certain kind of relation. To say as much is to diminish the negativity accruing to the *sinthome* in Morton and Žižek’s analysis; or, perhaps, to harness it to the ambivalent ends of enigmatic signification. By emphasising the materiality of textual effects in both *Memoir* and *Rising Sun* in the previous section I have sought, implicitly, to identify elements of these as enigmatic signifiers or as enigmatically signifying

scenes, in the sense that they ‘restore’ imperfect or plastic ‘worlds’ that have been lost and hinge on the atmospherically essentialising effects of ambient matter; especially, in the case of Susan and May, the self-alienating structures of ritual. The theme of absorption has been emphasised, as a result of textual immersion and textual pleasure, but its particular significance has not, perhaps, been made completely clear – with this final section, I will present some specific examples.

2.5 *Eurydice Relinquished*

The slightly romantic title of this section is a reference to McCarthy’s construction of Susan as Eurydice restored. In the course of *John McGahern and the Art of Memory*, McCarthy plots this process carefully and persuasively through reference to the Freudian theory of encryption – a theoretical apparatus also mobilised by Lloyd to account for indigent sublimity – and conceives of Susan’s restoration as an imaginative and aesthetic event. At the same time, however, as the comparison of Susan with May is intended to indicate, completed or redeemed mourning risks being interpreted as an electively redemptive impulse which, as in Van der Ziel’s analysis above, occludes that which *cannot* be restored or subject to stable interpretation. In the next chapter, the strategic politicisation of certain of McGahern’s narratives as redemptive in a more national sense will be dealt with as an inevitable extension of this; here, I intend to make a case for the critical choice to attend to otherness in McGahern’s work instead of narrative holism. The non-narrativised immanence of textual affectivity in *Rising Sun* invites precisely this alternative reading, but it is necessary to seek out those instances of non-address or non-disclosure, of dissimulation, as these are presented *figurally* in the text, and related in a more obvious way to the revision of relational logics within the context of *Gemeinschaft*. Morton uses this term to describe the illusory hermeticism and singularity of the community over a society, and it is similar to Negri’s construction of localism as a form of value-denomination problematically enmeshed in political

economy; *pave* Cleary, we might also think of localism as a consolatory category associated, in Chapter One, with the essentialised place-world of strategies like *dinnseanchas*. One way to undercut this is to place the content of McGahern's work in a studiously historical context, or to read individual works from a historically materialist perspective; another is to disrupt or subvert the authoritative claims to organic connection and transparently implied by this use of *Gemeinschaft*. This latter avenue of investigation is the one which will be opened here.

Joe Rutledge, McGahern's main protagonist in *Rising Sun*, is a returned emigrant to a remote lakeside community in Leitrim. On Christmas Day, he visits Patrick, his caustic but occasionally charming neighbour, and the scene which opens this sequence presents an ekphrastic intervention which echoes the slow episodes of description largely reserved, at other stages in the novel, for the natural world:

The door was unlocked. Inside, the room mustn't have changed in fifty or so years. It hadn't changed since Rutledge first saw it ten or fifteen years before, the brown dresser, the settlebed, the iron crook above the open hearth, the horse harness hanging between the religious pictures on the wall – the smiling Virgin, the blood-drip from the Crown of Thorns – all faded now with damp spots underneath the glass, the cheapness moving, since it too had been touched and held in depths of time. In the small window the stone walls were at least four feet thick. The naked electric bulb that hung from the ceiling answered to the switch.⁹⁵

This description continues; it takes note of tools, crockery, soap, food, peat, matches, a radio, and a clock. Its inventory of incidental details builds a picture of Patrick's private life and, when the older man emerges, he is apparently surprised and irritated by the intrusion. A further section of

Patrick's cottage – which, inevitably, echoes the vernacular detail of an Abbey 'peasant play', which is to say reproduces a legibly native space – tells us more about him:

In stark contrast, one small corner of the room was spare and neat. An iron rested on an ironing board. Two perfectly ironed white shirts were hung beside a pressed dark suit. A pair of fine black leather shoes that had been polished till they shone sat on a chair.

These are the 'props' of Patrick's imminent performance; for Christmas, he will 'go to entertain them in their own houses.'⁹⁶ If there is anything 'stage' Irish about this, and about Johnny's comparable performances of reticence and conciliation between the lake and London, it is implicitly linked to both the actual performance of J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and the kind of staunch, uncompromising, and 'unearthly' energy of a Shakespearean archetype; an anti-self, or the protean flux of a 'self' unbound to any final identity, as will be explored in Chapter Four. This is expressed in Ruttledge's subsequent encounter with Patrick himself:

Except for a shirt of rough material that fell to his hips he was naked. The strong body could have been the body of a younger man. This good-looking, vigorous man had lived all his life around the lake where nothing could be concealed, and he had never shown any sexual interest in another. 'I don't have to even countenance that job,' he joked once to Ruttledge. 'John Quinn has agreed to do my share.'⁹⁷

In Chapter One, I noted the association, in both Bersani and Barthes, between 'coming' and 'being', where both were understood as a form of productive self-obsolescence, libidinally liberating the socialised self from its abstract obligations and investments to privilege, if

temporarily, embodied enjoyment or *jouissance*. This is intended for comparison, or rather alignment, with the zone of productive affect isolated by Negri as without the structures of political economy – even if political economy seeks, to an always limited degree, to patent it. The degraded materiality of signs for national affiliation, registered in examples as diverse as Hillen’s *Irelantis*, the corpse of Michael Collins, and the folk animus of Douglas Hyde as it is processed by Stephen Dedalus, were offered as objective correlations for this after-affect, or *after-affection*, which both comes from proscription (nationalism; the symbolic regime of a text which is read) but operates in excess of it. This excess is self-alienating, in a way which is similar to the self-alienation of strategic essentialism, but also radically different, since, while strategic essentialism typically requires a sublimation of individual interests to those of the group, the self-alienating – self-shattering, self-dissimulating – embodied event I am speaking of here disbands or deconstructs individual interests themselves. It finds its way to solidarity, to a shared sense of value-affect, via self-divestiture, a rescinding of ego, via the uncannily proliferative logic of, so far, the *crise pléthorique*, indigent sublimity, the feminised *sinthome*, the poetics of peatsmoke, dark ecology, and, here, what will be imperfectly described, after Bersani, as erotic non-address.

This is *imperfect* because the frame of reference I drawing on does not fit neatly with the examples from McGahern I will be using here. None of these examples are, for instance, openly sexual: where McGahern’s writes on this theme, his descriptions are explicit, and while euphemisms for sexual interaction surface in conversation throughout *Rising Sun*, the only explicit instance is a rape scene. Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s use of the baroque artist Caravaggio as a vehicle for their theory of ‘being’ as ‘coming’ reflects an adjacent concern with writings on homosexuality, and links this psycho-somatic theory, once again, to the capacities for self-shattering inherent in men; this is not, however, quite so pronounced as elsewhere. That an article outlining some of the main points of the book takes as its example *The Taking of Christ* (1602) – a painting made accidentally Irish after its donation to, and eventual re-discovery at, a

Dublin Jesuit residence in 1990 – provides a fateful, if tenuous, link to McGahern. The appropriateness of my approach is more obviously underwritten, however, by McGahern's own interest in visual art, and, moreover, in 'the image on which our whole life took its most complete expression once'.⁹⁸

In John Cronin's opinion, 'The Image' is a pessimistic endorsement of a 'Stygian universe'; for this writer it is an, almost frustratingly, self-dissimulating text, which occasionally lapses into banality ('we have no reason or right to reign, nothing more than our instinctive need; so we reign in the illusory permanence of false gods'), and which is more interesting for the connections it makes with other works and modes of thought. The most obvious of these is Marcel Proust; another is the Augustinian description of the memory as 'the belly of the mind', containing discrete and objectivised memories which can be regurgitated through 'rumination'. A further is the imagist aesthetics of Thomism, and especially the category of 'visio', which provides a means of theorising the objectivisation of intellectual response through a process of perceptual adequation. The influence, on McGahern, of this mnemonic sensibility has been commented upon; what remains for me to do, differently, here, is to compare it to the disseminated, refracted, or otherwise externalised selfhood 'found' in Bersani's analysis. We might begin with the observation that, if *visio* and the logic of the madeleine are crossed, what results is a discovery of memory (of the self) in external objects the apprehension of which is a matter of gradual and dilated adequation. That such an act must take place – that the 'yard of lead piping', for instance, should contain the presence of an alienated mnemonic significance, a portion of the self which is displaced and made opaque, to be *rediscovered* through rumination – awards to external objects a degree of alterity which is, crucially, *also a part of the self*. This suggests something of what Bersani means when he describes 'masochism not as pleasure in pain so much as the pleasure of at once losing the self and discovering it elsewhere, inaccurately replicated'⁹⁹: memory, 'joy and sadness [like] sweet and bitter food', as a beneficent estrangement and rediscovery of selfhood. Bersani

detects this precise experience in *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and opposes it to the culture of redemption because it does not restore the narrative integrity of history, but fractures it by reserving a space for the self-as-other and, as a result, for ‘otherness as such.’

I wish to make an example of locating ‘otherness as such’ in the scene from *Rising Sun* explained above: here, Rutledge’s encounter with his neighbour, with both the accumulated or affiliating matter of his life (much of which makes evident the passage of time) and the ‘polished’ objects of his public persona, climaxed in a brief but significant instance of eroticised *separateness*. Patrick, the ‘good-looking, vigorous man’ who has ‘lived all his life around the lake where nothing could be concealed’, has nonetheless ‘never shown any sexual interest in another’ – although we, via Rutledge, who discloses this particular impression of Patrick’s physicality, are brought into a zone of interest which makes sexuality present by delineating it negatively. The ‘other’ or others Patrick might have shown interest in are not gender-specific; his closest friend is the emigrant Johnny, whose pursuit, to London, of a woman in youth has led to a life of celibacy. Celibacy is a running theme of McGahern’s work, and is usually the lot of country bachelors who remain convinced of the ‘superiority’ of childlessness, or who have been forced by economic necessity, religious policing, or cultural trauma to avoid forming romantic or reproductive alliances. With Johnny, the displacement and loneliness this engenders are palpable, for all of his cheer – in one of the stories he tells on a visit home, a ‘pufter’, temporarily lodging in the same place as Johnny and a band of Irish construction workers, is ‘taken away in an ambulance’ when he attempts to get close to ‘a good-looking black haired lad from the Galway Gaeltacht’, suggesting an extension of sexual prohibition which implicitly includes Johnny too.¹⁰⁰ In spite of this, however, when Johnny dies towards the end of *Rising Sun* it is his body which is stripped and prepared for presentation, in an extended and singular scene, by both Rutledge and a neighbour whom Patrick, incidentally, describes as ‘that molly of a hairdresser’.¹⁰¹ Grace Tighe Ledwidge observes that ‘there are hints of latent homosexuality in the novel’s depiction of Johnny’s

friendship with Patrick Ryan', but this is not really signalled; rather, what Ledwidge may be describing is the latent queerness of the sexually disjointed or disengaged, and her evocation of Vladimir and Estragon is closer to the mark. This position places both men outside the structure of the family cell, making them 'medieval humours' or types, perhaps, of soon-to-be lost demographics, but also leaving their respective bodies open to being 'known' as unknowable.

'When I interviewed McGahern shortly after the publication of *Amongst Women*', Aubrey Malone recalls, 'I asked him how he viewed the character of Moran. 'It wouldn't be fair of me to say', he replied [...] as if he saw the man as having a separate life, or even as if he was not his creator.'¹⁰² We might also consider Elizabeth Reegan of *The Barracks*, introduced to us with a bent head, a figure for 'blocked, oppressed or oppressing, neutralised desire', as well as psychic interiority:¹⁰³

A boy of twelve and two dark-haired girls were close about her at the fire. They'd grown uneasy, in the way children can indoors in the failing light. The bright golds and scarlets of the religious pictures on the walls had faded, their glass glittered now in the sudden flashes of firelight, and as it deepened the dusk turned reddish from the Sacred Heart lamp that burned before the small wickerwork crib of Bethlehem on the mantelpiece. Only the cups and saucers laid ready on the table for their father's tea were white and brilliant.¹⁰⁴

Grennan has compared this passage to a 'Dutch interior'. McGahern's admiration for Velazquez or Vermeer would, with varying degrees of epochal accuracy, complement this, but it does not have to be interpreted as emphasising the putative literalness of naturalism. How does this change, for example, when we consider that the Dutch interior and the still life are generic conventions which register both the wealth of colonial expansion, and the related marketability of

lightweight oil paintings? The petty sacralisation of Elizabeth's domestic space, located in a police barracks which latently represents the architectural legacy of British military presence in Ireland, becomes stranger by refraction through this lens – which, moreover, may encode an alternatively material riposte to its own historical materialism. Joanna Woodall disputes the assumption that Dutch colonial art should only be judged according to a retrospective appreciation of the violence underpinning bourgeoisification, arguing that the meditation on objects and interior spaces native to this tradition may also refer to contemporary developments in ocular theory and phenomenology.¹⁰⁵ If this is the case it problematises the semiotic transparency of the mimetically laden tables of still life and, perhaps, of *The Barracks*, allowing such objects as the 'white and brilliant' crockery laid for Sergeant Reegan a degree of semantic opacity. This would echo Elizabeth's repeated search for meaning in her domestic world, which is so often met with a sense of obscure awe or of Beckettian meaninglessness, and which concludes when the dying woman hallucinates a drawn blind. It also recalls the thingly recalcitrance of the 'yard of lead piping', a prop for mnemonic reconstitution and for affiliation through repetition and omission in fiction, but which nonetheless does not, arguably, signal the restoration of the world – rather, it is a sign for the loss of this world, and for its synthetic and extemporised reconstitution in the fictional, *supplementary*, 'world in which we can reign'.

I have said that, if the Thomist principle of *visio* is considered alongside the latency of object-sensations in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, or the logic of the madeleine, what results is a discovery or detection of memory, which is to say *of the self*, in, firstly, external objects, and, secondly, in external objects the apprehension of which is a matter of slow or dilated apprehension and adequation. Such graduation is inherent in *visio* as a means of syncretising the mental faculties and the objective structure of the object, scene, space, or phenomenon being observed. For the neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose work had much influence on interwar modernism

and may have been familiar to McGahern, such rumination is predicated on the existence of mystery, on the measure of alterity which is present in the external world:

[...] where the mystery aspect prevails the intellect has to penetrate more and more deeply into the *same* object. The mind is stationary turning around a fixed point. Or rather it pierces further and further into the same depth. This is progress in the same place, progress through *deepening*.¹⁰⁶

Despite the Thomist suggestions of 'The Image', the only explicit reference to Thomas Aquinas in his writings actually appears in 'The Bird Swift', in which 'Paddy' quotes: 'The image is a principle of our knowledge. It is that from which our intellectual activity begins, not as a passing stimulus, but as an enduring foundation.'¹⁰⁷ If we can consider such 'objectivisation of subjectivity' as similar to McGahern's 'world in which we can reign', we can begin to trace affinities between 'The Image' and the gathered tenets of Thomist aesthetic thought. In particular, I wish to emphasise the qualities of concentration or absorption, of 'throwness' in a built scene, and to flag the possible marshalling of these in favour of an ethical approach to *character* as that which is also unstable, diffuse, or recalcitrant: as that which is opaque, or which registers 'otherness as such'. Certain aspects of *visio* (which, as I am implying here, is the basis, or one of the bases, for 'The Image') share an affinity with Bersani's 'self-shattering', as this figure promotes the re-discovery of the aspects of the self as *differently constituted* in the external world – as forming part, that is, of the enigmatic signifier, of that share of eidetic genealogy which is not transparent but which retains its thingly latency. *Visio* involves a gradual interpenetration of self and object, or self and world, through meditation, repeated or gradual apprehension, or, as I would specify here, rumination on 'the image'. 'In so far as the intellect penetrates the meaning of the object it is conformed to this meaning, and to this extent the subjective apprehension of the intellect is rendered objective': this amounts to self-objectivisation in the world, and '[thus] we

can say that aesthetic experience is constituted by the delight which results from the *objectivisation of subjectivity* [my italics], by self-alienation in ritual, ideology, or strategic essentialism, and via a discovery of the otherness of the *self* through engagement with this self as *inserted into the self-alienating edifice* – as sustaining it through *jouissance*.¹⁰⁸

Visio, then, is a sustained gaze: erotic non-address, on the other hand, is a form of refused return, a position of sustained signifying enigma or short-circuiting, or a gesture of relation which does not conclude in any specific relation. The meeting of these two in McGahern's work may be thought of as a rupture or confrontation; one which, as Bersani implies, creates space for lateral thinking athwart normative, conservative, dominant, or traditional narratives. Such diversification is facilitated by the gestural limit proposed by the *sinthome* (which also undercuts ideology) and the enigmatic signifier, and is on display in instance as varied as May's 'return' via Douglas Hyde, the symbolic volatility of the oilcloth shopping bag, the uncanny immanence of Susan's preserved or autonomous incantations, the knowable-unknown non-address of Patrick's obscured eroticism, Elizabeth Reegan's private absorption, or the intense thanatopolitical deconstruction of Johnny's embalment and burial. As a final example I propose an image of Susan which is split or doubly constituted in a way similar to the shopping bag, recurring in the last two texts of McGahern's career, and thus providing two poles of mnemonic association between which our readerly co-production can 'gush'.

In *Memoir*, this scene is relayed as a second-hand anecdote. It refers to one of the final summers of Susan's life, at a time when she is pregnant and also experiencing the return of her cancer, which will kill her within a year:

Years later, a daughter of the Mrs Finan who had taught me in Cootehall, told me that in the very early hours of one morning in that summer her mother had come

on my mother walking barefooted in her nightdress in a field close to the barracks. She told Mrs Finan that she hadn't been able to sleep and that the cold dew of the grass on her feet eased her pain [...] I was so plunged back into time and memory by the images of the nightdress and her bare feet in Gilligan's field or Lenehan's orchard that I neglected to ask Marie what she thought her own mother was doing walking about on her own in the fields in those grey hours.¹⁰⁹

Although the adult McGahern can be 'plunged back into time and memory' by the trigger of this mental picture, even he is at a remove from Susan's suffering as this singularly unusual and distressing image of it is processed via Mrs Finan and her daughter. For the reader, there is still another remove, since the pictorial succinctness of the reconstituted 'Susan's' isolation and pain comes to us through a written portrait which is a retelling of a verbal one. At the same time, its transformation as art – what is described in *The Leavetaking* as 'memory becoming imagination' – allows elements of this scene to be supplement or doubled or hybridised, in much the same way as the oilcloth shopping bag. In the first, and in the form of a very vague, associative, trace, there is McGahern's allusion to Lenehan's orchard in interview in Maher, and during another discussion about childhood and religion; in this, McGahern suggests a link between early religious 'fiction', literary fiction, and place, explaining sacred myths and rituals as 'a revelation of truth': '[we] absolutely believed in Heaven and Hell, Purgatory and Limbo. I mean, they were actually close to us than Australia or Canada, they were real places':

EM: A physical state?

JMG: I remember writing once that there was an orchard beside the barracks, Lenehans' [sic] orchard, and somehow in my imaginings of Heaven, Lenehans' orchard was some place around the entrance.

EM: It may have had something to do with the Garden of Eden.

JMG: I don't know, maybe it had.¹¹⁰

It may also have something to do with Susan's purgatorial sleeplessness – if only to the reader, when these images are linked. Both her faith and the fantasy place-world of 'A Slip-Up', or indeed *Rising Sun*, are also latent here, since they too conjure somatographic landscapes overlaid with both mythical and literal relevance; in the case of this anecdote of Susan, bodily implication is highly sensory (the cold dew) and marked as negative (the pain), though we cannot share in it or understand it, only apprehend her as a figural composition – a woman, 'the nightdress and her bare feet', encountered in an unorthodox position and not addressing us, but addressing Mrs Finan, a figure obscured by the unknown status of her own motivations in 'walking about on her own in the fields'. This starker decantation of Susan's textual or remembered image is the one which resurfaces, then, in *Rising Sun*, during the story of the fate of Margaret Quinn, the woman who marries John Quinn and is publically raped by him on their wedding day. Quinn's act is territorial and, subsequently, both Margaret and the property she comes with are neglected and mistreated to the point of derangement:

'[Margaret's parents] lasted no time. They faded away. Tom Sweeney never let a morsel of food pass his lips for weeks before he died. Margaret had the eight children, and then she got bad. One morning Johnny was out with the gun he saw her walking in her nightdress and her bare feet in the dew before it was fully light to see if the coolness would ease the pain. In the end the schoolchildren didn't want to pass the gate on their way to school because they were frightened by her cries.'¹¹¹

The violence Margaret is subjected to is more overt than that of Susan's life, but not wholly remote from it: 'She had seven children in nine years,' McGahern remarks in 'My Education', an

essay which appeared some nine years before *Memoir*, ‘and then she died.’ Another, still subtler, note of affinity is struck between *Rising Sun* and *Memoir* when the site of Margaret’s assault is described as ‘the top of the slope where the rock field slopes down to the shore’ and where, in ‘dry spells’, the grass ‘turns red’, anticipating a myth of the brutal Chidley Coote and his brethren retold when the world of the barracks at Cootehall is described:

Beside Moran’s well, on the shore of Cootehall Lake, where we went in the boat for spring water in dry summers, a strip of rock was pointed out where another of the Cootes was thrown from his horse and killed when hunting a priest. Around this rock the grass was said to turn red in summer.¹¹²

Margaret’s story has taken on a faintly mythical quality, as does Susan’s walking in the early morning, and both involve, like the story of the Cootes, a pronounced sense of *siting*, an association with a particular place which is changed or charged by the association, whether through a sinister discolouration of grass, or by association with an image of heaven’s gate. In a significant way this is also a form of *citation*, of drawing on or triggering prior knowledge within the context of McGahern’s *oeuvre*, and of effecting a sense of associative accumulation which is, paradoxically, both authoritative and symbolically volatile. Paul Ricoeur points to a degree of sameness or rigidity in the phenomenology of memories, emphasising less singularity than representativeness:

Things and people do not simply appear, they reappear as being the same, and it is in accordance with this sameness of reappearing that we remember them [...] Memorable meetings after themselves to be remembered due less to their unrepresentable singularity than to their typical resemblance, even their emblematic character.¹¹³

I will have reason to develop this sense of *citationality* presently; for now, it is helpful to recall the bent head of Elizabeth Reegan in the painterly opening scene of *The Barracks*, which I have briefly highlighted as an emblematic figure for blocked expression or psychic interiority.

Grennan's comparison with the 'Dutch interior' enriches this, since the art theorist Michael Fried would describe Elizabeth's figural appearance as an example of the conceit of 'beholder-denial' in visual art; a condition of surfaces – emphasised by the play of light on surfaces in this textual image – which makes a claim for the ontological autonomy of the image and forecloses on interpretative transparency in ways which can, and should, be compared to the experience of absorption highlighted and explored above. We are talking, then, about a doubling of pose of absorption itself – of our absorption in the work and Susan's, or Elizabeth's, absorption in their respective experiences, in their unknowable lives. Shortly after Maher and McGahern discuss the heavenly province of Lenehan's orchard, the critic points out that Elizabeth, as a character, 'suffers much and yet is receptive to the beauty of nature and the cycle of life', asking the writer to elaborate on 'the role and meaning of revelation' in his work. McGahern demurs: 'That belongs to the reader.' His subsequent comments explain this:

[I think] that the only difference between the writer and the reader is that each of us has a private world that other's cannot see and that it's with that private world that we all read. It's a spiritual, private world. And the only difference between the writer and the reader is that he (the writer) has the knack or talent to be able to dramatise that private world and turn it into words.¹¹⁴

The writer cites Joyce on the book as a 'coffin of words', and in the context of these various shades of intersecting or co-produced privacy, we might place the unknowable – but presumably

present, or *present-in-absence* – interior world of a character like Michael Moran, Margaret Quinn, or Susan McGahern. Erotic non-address and the refused return relate to this; far from endorsing a vision of Eurydice restored (and ossified), they create a space for the consideration of Susan misunderstood, refracted, partially glimpsed, or otherwise opaque, a space for the reader to develop a disposition towards this figure which is comparable to McGahern's refusal to conclusively 'explain' revelation or Elizabeth. Such a reading renders the reader herself more vulnerable than an apparently holistic or authoritative, 'traditional', and restorative reading would do, and, on an equally relevant level, tolerates the degree of otherness accruing to a world which is only partly or supplementarily restored. This otherness, in turn, facilitates, finally, a rethinking of the history this writing is related to – the history it represents, remembers, cites, or proposes to reconstitute; its perspective is minor and, to partake of this, we must read for difference, which is to say for the *diversifying capacities* of affective response.

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 168.

² Douglas Hyde, 'My Grief on the Sea', *Lyra Celtica: An Anthology of Representative Celtic Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth Amelia Sharp and J. Matthay (New York: Haskell, 1932), p. 126.

³ Robert Adams Day, 'How Stephen Wrote His Vampire Poem', *James Joyce Quarterly* 17.2 (Winter, 1980), pp. 183-197 [pp. 187-192].

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵ Richard Begam, 'Joyce's Trojan Horse: *Ulysses* and the Aesthetics of Decolonization', *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899-1939*, ed. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 185-208 [p. 197].

⁶ David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1994), p. 104.

⁷ Joseph Valente, 'Race/Sex/Shame: The Queer Nationalism of *At Swim, Two Boys*', *Eire-Ireland* 40.3/4 (Fall/Winter 2005), pp. 58-84 [p. 65].

⁸ *Ulysses*, p. 682.

⁹ Joyce quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 169.

¹⁰ Augusta Gregory, 'Grief of a Girl's Heart', *Irish Writing: An Anthology of Irish Literature in English 1789-1939*, ed. Stephen Regan (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004), pp. 336-338 [p. 338].

¹¹ Philip Freeman, *The World of Saint Patrick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 54.

¹² Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 211.

¹³ Edward Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-world* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 48.

¹⁴ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 42-43.

¹⁵ Morton, p. 43.

- ¹⁶ Quoted in Jacques Derrida, 'The Night Watch', trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Derrida and Joyce: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Andrew J. Mitchell and Sam Slote (New York: State University of New York, 2013).
- ¹⁷ Michael J. Toolin, 'The Historian and the Pornographer', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 7.2 (December, 1981), pp. 39-55 [p. 41].
- ¹⁸ Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass., 1991), p. 1.
- ¹⁹ Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2006), p. 165.
- ²⁰ John McGahern, *The Dark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 188.
- ²¹ Cleary, p. 165.
- ²² McGahern, 'The Image', *Love of the World: Collected Essays*, ed. Stanley Van der Ziel (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), pp. 7-8 [p. 7].
- ²³ Stanley Van der Ziel, 'The Aesthetics of Redemption: John McGahern's "That They May Face the Rising Sun"', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 93.372, pp. 473-486 [p. 479].
- ²⁴ Richard Robinson, 'An Umbrella, a Pair of Boots, and a 'Spacious Nothing': McGahern and Beckett', *Irish University Review* 44.2 (Autumn/Winter, 2014), pp. 323-340 [p. 326].
- ²⁵ Eamon Maher, 'Home is Where the Heart is: Arrivals and Departures in John McGahern's Short Stories', *Doctrine and Life* 64.3 (March, 2014), pp. 27-35 [p.34].
- ²⁶ John McGahern, *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 374-408 [p. 377].
- ²⁷ McGahern, 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing', *Love of the World*, pp. 128-132 [p. 129].
- ²⁸ McGahern, 'The Country Funeral', *The Collected Stories* (Faber and Faber: London, 1992), pp. 374-408 [p. 387].
- ²⁹ John McGahern, 'A Slip-Up', *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 127-132 [p. 128].
- ³⁰ McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 210.
- ³¹ 'A Slip-Up', p. 132.
- ³² Maher, 'The Universal is the Local without Walls: John McGahern and the Global Project', *Cultural Perspectives on Globalisation and Ireland*, ed. Eamon Maher (Peter Lang: Bern, 2009), pp. 211-232 [p. 214].
- ³³ McGahern, 'From a Glorious Dream to Wink and Nod', *Love of the World*, pp. 125-132 [p. 125].
- ³⁴ McGahern, 'Faith, Hope and Charity', *Collected Stories*, pp. 146-153 [p. 147], and 'A Country Funeral', pp. 374-408 [p. 375].
- ³⁵ McGahern, 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing', *Love of the World* pp. 128-132 [p. 129-130].
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- ⁴⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Hill and Wang: New York, 1974), pp. 3-4.
- ⁴⁶ Declan Kiberd, 'Introduction', *Love of the World*, pp. xi-xxiii [p. xix].
- ⁴⁷ McGahern, 'The Solitary Reader', pp. 87-95 [p. 87, 88-89].
- ⁴⁸ *Memoir*, p. 178, and *Young John McGahern*, p. 6.
- ⁴⁹ *Memoir*, p. 178, 179.
- ⁵⁰ Barthes, p. 14.
- ⁵¹ 'The Solitary Reader', p. 90.
- ⁵² Bersani in 'A Conversation with Leo Bersani', p. 8.
- ⁵³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson (Malden: Blackwell, 1962), part two, II 276 [p. 321]. For a description of the 'they-self' comparable to the socialised self, see part one, IV 129 [p. 166-168].
- ⁵⁴ *Rising Sun*, p. 15.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 34.
- ⁵⁶ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 121.
- ⁵⁷ This recalls, of course, the parable of the Rutledge's unfinished shed; see *Rising Sun*, p. 71.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 250.
- ⁵⁹ Morton, p. 44.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, 81.
- ⁶¹ McGahern, 'Dubliners', *Love of the World*, pp. 200-207 (p.207).
- ⁶² Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics', in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: Wiley, 1980), pp. 350-377 (p. 355).

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- ⁶³ Morton, p. 37.
- ⁶⁴ McGahern, *The Pornographer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 252.
- ⁶⁵ *Rising Sun*, p. 257.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 255.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 254-261.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 48.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 258.
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- ⁷⁷ *Rising Sun*, p. 114.
- ⁷⁸ *Rising Sun*, p. 251.
- ⁷⁹ Dermot McCarthy, *John McGahern and the Art of Memory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 14.
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- ⁸⁴ *Memoir*, p. 272.
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- ⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 127-128.
- ⁹¹ McCarthy, p. 13.
- ⁹² McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005 [1974]), p. 63.
- ⁹³ *Memoir*, pp. 47-59.
- ⁹⁴ *Ulysses*, p. 683.
- ⁹⁵ McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (Faber and Faber: London, 2002), p. 212.
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- ⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 213.
- ⁹⁸ McGahern, 'The Image', *Love of the World* pp. 7-8 [p. 7].
- ⁹⁹ Bersani in 'A Conversation with Leo Bersani', p. 6.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Rising Sun*, p. 85.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 292.
- ¹⁰² Malone, p. 14.
- ¹⁰³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 5.
- ¹⁰⁴ John McGahern, *The Barracks* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000 [1963]), p. 7.
- ¹⁰⁵ See Joanna Woodall, 'Laying the Table: The Procedures of Still Life', *The Erotics of Looking: Early Modern Netherlandish Art*, ed. Angela Vanhaelen and Bronwen Wilson (Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, 2013), pp. 110-138.
- ¹⁰⁶ Maritain, Jacques, *A Preface to Metaphysics*, 7.
- ¹⁰⁷ McGahern, 'The Bird Swift', 74.
- ¹⁰⁸ Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 41.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Memoir*, p. 89.
- ¹¹⁰ Maher, 'Catholicism and National Identity in the Work of John McGahern', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 90.357 (Spring, 2001), pp. 72-83 [p. 74].
- ¹¹¹ *Rising Sun*, p. 31.
- ¹¹² *Memoir*, p. 27.
- ¹¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellasser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 23.
- ¹¹⁴ 'Catholicism and National Identity', p. 75.

A Child is Being Beaten:

Anatomy of Reaction to *The Dark*

The text is (should be) that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the *political father*.¹

Introduction

The piece begins with the illuminated wall accompanied by the ambient sound of birdsong. Two metal forms begin to tear through the wall and raise it to reveal a band of green grass beneath. As the wall continues to retreat upwards it becomes apparent that the artist is driving a tractor and reversing with the wall impaled on its forklift, replacing what we thought was the gallery wall with an unspecific view of the countryside.²

Matt Calderwood's *Screen*, an installation commissioned by Dublin City Gallery in 2005, 'opens' the gallery onto a scene of bucolic banality that is almost Beckettian in its initial momentousness and subsequent monotony; a grey day in the country, asking nothing, and providing little in the way of explanation [fig. 3]. While its gesture 'out there' to a world beyond the gallery might be read as didactic, *Screen*'s structural indebtedness to this space cannot be transcended: although intended as a mischievous mode of 'escape' which punctures the 'white cube' of the gallery, its lack of instruction, the 'unspecific' stillness of the escape it suggests, folds back onto the opacity

of the wall from which it takes its substance. The horizon of Calderwood's footage and the boundary of the gallery wall are both tasked with defining the limit of the work's symbolic and spatial extension, which raises the question of whether one is looking at a field or a wall, and which of these limits, the simulacral or the literal, is *the* limit of *Screen* – the limit which both contains and facilitates it. Jacques Derrida's concept of the *re-mark*, 'a special mark (or series of them) that makes us aware that we are in the presence of (significant) marks' is relevant here, and might be glossed a signal for *context* not reducible to the particular terms of that context, as a frame both within and without the artwork, or a mark doubled back on itself as a sign for the system it belongs to.³ As indicated in the Introduction to this dissertation, Timothy Morton places the re-mark at the centre of ambient poetics as a *Gestalt* distinction between figure and ground which can only be encountered as figure *or* ground. Ambient sensibility aspires to either collapse this distinction or to make a claim for something 'in between'.

This in-between state in a work of ambient art like *Screen* would be an amalgamation of inside and outside, a belief in the simultaneous presence or consubstantiality of the gallery wall and the field, and it is a matter of ethical import to Morton that such a 'holding open' of space between art and reality is refuted. It is ethically compromised because it presents the eternal 'out there' of the natural world, a force of irreducible otherness, as available for decantation into moments of encounter with symbols, fragments, and emissaries. Disregarding the re-mark, then, leads to an illusory sense of entry into, in this instance, a field that is really a gallery wall, or rather into the 'out there' space of *Ireland* via the alchemical transformation of a gallery wall. As the 'wall' is removed, matter which is both literally and politically marginal – birdsong, a 'band' of grass, unbuilt space – floods into the foreground, and this conceit, for Morton, is political. It interposes between the subject and the objective, othered environment which the subject should endeavour to accept in its unglamorous, uneasy, ambiguous, or otherwise problematic materiality – its 'dark ecology' – instead of sheltering behind the consolatory supplements of staged

Stimmung. As *Screen* progresses, however, any pastoral suggestions are effaced, and this work becomes, instead, a declaration of precisely the ‘dark ecology’ Morton proposes; we neither idealise this ‘window’ onto farmland nor escape an awareness of the false window provided by the screen. Experientially speaking, *Screen* is an alienating event. One might compare it to the luminous photorealism of Martin Gale, whose landscape paintings could, in turn, illustrate the world of McGahern’s work, and whose occasional pop-art opacity presents a visual correlation to the spatialised enigmatic signifiers I have considered in Chapter Two – an opacity indebted, in turn, to René Magritte. This enigma, like dark ecology, and like Calderwood’s self-declaring structural re-mark (the screen), works to estrange or defamiliarise, in this instance, ideas like landscape-painting-as-mimesis, or the legibility and ‘givability’ of the visual scene, or the availability of national space and place for Romantic consumption. It draws attention to its atmosphere as *synthetic* rather than essential; landscape, as Gale has explained, as ‘a basis on which to build a picture [a] bit like a stage on which [the painter can] set these dramas or incidents, human or otherwise.’⁴ We might refer back to *Rising Sun*, a work which persistently curates views.

At the close of the previous chapter, one of these views or images – that of the barefoot Susan against the heavenly orchard, transmuted into Margaret Quinn’s gendered suffering of abuse and cruelty – was offered as an example of non-address which makes use of the artistic conceit of beholder-denial, or of the ontological autonomy of the artwork and its image, to dis-identify with Susan even as her plight appears to appeal to us through the recollections of her son. I have placed a question posed by Conor Carville at the beginning of this dissertation: ‘can contemporary cultural criticism evolve a theory of the subject which does more than merely retool familiar ideas of authenticity and identity, and yet still retain a sense of the affective power of affiliation, the role of culture in the articulation of difference?’ It is my contention that ‘decentred selfhood’ supplies a ready figure for this kind of revised relationality, especially as this potential for dissimulating *jouissance* is both explored as a vector for ideological conditioning and

hence ideological subversion, and as related ideas of refused return and enigmatic address are detected and respected in the scene of McGahern's textual world. Reading any phenomenological scene – in this case, Irish landscape as inscape of national identity – for its enigmatic properties does not mean crediting this landscape with mythical or mystical properties; on the contrary, it means staying the moment of deconstruction, decomposition, and flux, and regarding the category of space-as-waste as a productive site for affective engagement. The abjectly feminine implications of the *sinthome* have been helpful in elucidating this, and have indirectly underpinned my reading of Susan for otherness rather than interpretative dominance; for Susan as enigmatic signifier rather than 'key' to McGahern's work. The productively problematising opacity of a work like *Screen* imparts a similar sentiment: the scene of *Screen* might well be the garden/orchard/field (the *framed space*) of Susan/Margaret's purgatory, while its cyclical opening-and-shutting of the image itself might be compared to the recurrence and reshaping of this borrowed or acquired 'memory'. Dis-identification is, then, a productive outcome of the self-declared *supplementary* encounter, of *self-consciously poetic ambience*. For Morton, this distancing effect is a form of Romantic irony.

The practice of reading for enigmatic signification equates, here, to a reading of McGahern's mimesis or McGahern's naturalism – to McGahern's *historical scene* – as enigmatic, or *for* those irreconcilable elements which would obscure and complicate traditional readings. This capacity for analysing affect rather than proscription has been related to Antonio Negri's theory of an affective 'power to act', and as such suggests a means of accounting for difference through culture without 'retooling' stable notions of authenticity or devaluing culture's contribution to critical theory; this has been my response to Carville, and will be further elaborated upon here. It is important to distance my argument from relational pastoralism. I do not believe that the work of John McGahern should provide us with a template for 'living more fully', and I will be focusing forthwith on notably bleaker material. In particular, the following chapter emphasises

those tools for pictorial or intermedial analysis employed in Chapter Two to account for ‘the image’ and for readerly encounters with its textual manifestations in McGahern’s work; this visual sensibility is now applied, experimentally but with a specific interpretative aim, to the opening scene of McGahern’s second novel *The Dark*, and in a more overtly political context than has been considered until now. The above is the backdrop against which I propose a radical revision of the socio-historical meaning of *The Dark* by disrupting existing narratives of comprehension and atonement that surround the biopolitical history of the Free State. These narratives, broadly speaking, propose a form of healing which, in its demand for transparency, dishonours the non-representational nature of the suffering of the other and foregrounds modes of interpretation *from without the other*, which is to say under the remit of the socialised self. It is my contention that McGahern’s novel offers a unique and acute opportunity to problematise this.

In discussing institutional abuse, I am referring always to a structural phenomenon, and therefore speaking largely in abstractions; in a related way, I will also read the opening scene of *The Dark* as a cultural product, analysable for its mechanical processes and textual effects, as opposed to an approach which would interpret it biographically. This is in spite of the fact that *Memoir* revisits the ‘big iron bed with the broken brass bells’ which recurs in a number of scenes throughout McGahern’s work, and revises the father of *The Dark* as a version of Francis McGahern:

He never interfered with me in an obviously sexual way, but he frequently massaged my belly and thighs. As in all other things connected with the family, he asserted that this was for my own good [...] Looking back, and remembering the tone of his voice and the rhythmic movement of his hand, I suspect he was masturbating. During the beatings there was sometimes the same sexual undertow, but louder, coarser.⁵

The equivalent section of *The Dark* is similarly spare in its imparting of information, such that the masturbation is not ‘obvious’, but implied – although fair-copy precedents in the archive at the National University of Ireland Galway disclose a more explicit version of events. It is possible that the starker scene which appears in *The Dark* is a product of editorial excision, and may even have been an attempt to avoid, or at least acknowledge, censorship. If this is the case it is at odds with McGahern’s later professions of surprise at the novel’s banning, as well as the tone of general reticence (or disinterest) which, as Val Nolan observes, surrounds the banning in commentary on his work. Such negation also risks underestimating the significance of this text to current understandings of the relation between biopolitical violence and organisational structures in post-independence Ireland, as well as the regulatory centrality of the family cell. Above all the role of bodies that matter and bodies that do not in this economy has been poorly accounted for in official reactions to the legacy of abuse in modern Irish culture, in spite, or perhaps because, of the extension of such exclusionary formations into the postmodern state.

In the previous chapter, two elements of Susan’s presentation were stressed as significant: her vocal trace, imagined as a chant and drawn from devotional phrases, and her figural appearance in a pictorial composition which takes the field or orchard as its backdrop, Susan’s vulnerability as its subject, and the limits of McGahern’s understanding of this situation as its framing device. It is a memory tinged with pathos and mystery, enigmatic or opaque as an unexplained gesture in a painting, and preserved ‘intact’, available for reconstitution elsewhere. As such, it enjoins a degree of *formal autonomy* I wish to explore in more detail here, and especially to illustrate via a more detailed engagement with Michael Fried’s theory of ‘beholder-denial’. To begin with we should think of the absent trees of ‘A Country Funeral’, interpreted by Richard Robinson as a form of presence-in-absence which contributes to a Beckettian emphasis on what absence *is* in McGahern’s work; these non-trees might also be thought of as a form of refused

return, obliging the subject to fall back on the contingency of affiliation and, perhaps, the plasticity or detrital persistence of what, in 'The Image', were described as 'dead images and their days'. It should be clear by now that, *pace* Morton and Negri, I consider the post-symbolic, post-ideological, or post-emotive matter to be a site of productive potential for revised affective engagement, and hence revised relationality – pointing, in the case of 'A Country Funeral', to that which is excluded rather than that which is reconstituted. If this is brought to bear on the primal scene of Susan McGahern, we become attentive, not to her restorative instrumentalism in McGahern's imaginative economy, but to all that we *do not know* about Susan McGahern: about her suffering, her obscured personhood in the systems that made her a victim. This is a strategically negative reading which discounts much of what is positive in Susan's characterisation, and I adopt it on the grounds that redemptive or restorative Susan has been abundantly emphasised in works like McCarthy's *John McGahern and the Art of Memory*; what is needed now, arguably, is some darker ecology.

I have discussed Thomist *visio* as a doctrine of gradual interpenetration between self and object or self and world through rumination; as a form of self-objectivisation or self-extensibility analogous to decentred selfhood and the potential for open-ended (rather than dominant or reductive) interpersonal sympathy fostered by encounters with the enigmatic signifier and with non-returned address. It should be noted, in case it has not been made clear, that *non-returned address* describes such situations as barefoot Susan: a (textual) spectacle we are implicitly instructed to engage with or *gaze upon*, a composition intended for consumption, whose subject – Susan, 'Ireland', the other who putatively exists *for me* – does not coherently address or communicate with us, even as he, she, or it articulates *a gesture of address* by dint of his, her, or its very presence in a given context. This process vexes the habitual linearity of what Maurice Blanchot called 'the law of the same', a means of relating to the other which colonises it:

Man wants unity, he observes separation. What is other – be it some other thing or some other person – he must work to render identical. Adequation and identification, with mediation as their means [...] provide the paths by which he aims to reduce everything to the same, but also to give to the same the plenitude of the whole that it must in the end become.⁶

At the same time as this refusal, or conceit of refusal, or thwarted gesture of pictorial colonisation, occurs, it is nonetheless still the case that an image *needs* to be ‘lit’ or co-produced by a viewing subject, or by the reader entering into imaginative sympathy with McGahern as he reconstructs an image. The past and future, as the character of Kate in *Rising Sun* claims, may be ‘images in the mind’, but they must be made extensible as *tableaux* for our apprehension in McGahern’s textual scene, and only initiate the ‘moment of coupling’ which engenders pleasure in the text, or in apprehension, via this process of self-extensibility (the artist reconstructs an image from memory) and imaginative interpenetration (the reader contemplates the image). Because images, figments, fragments, and figures *recur* in McGahern’s work, giving rise to a sense of doubling or proliferation which will be explored in Chapter Four, the reader of McGahern is encouraged or obliged to contemplate, to enter into a form of dilated meditation on these ‘dead images’ over the course of numerous works. Seamus Heaney, consciously paraphrasing Saint Augustine, has described McGahern’s imagination as ‘ruminant’; ‘It chews the cud of the past, digests and redigests it, interrogates it for its meaning’, so that ‘it would be a misunderstanding of his art to imply [...] that McGahern is repeating himself. He is rather retrieving himself, achieving a new self.’⁷ Two ideas are important to my adequation of this contention: in the first, that a certain figural austerity and autonomy often means that imagistic emissaries of ‘the cud of the past’ harden into enigmatic attitudes and, in the second, that this enigmatic materiality forecloses on the total ‘retrieving’ of the self, creating space for a sense of ambiguity and extrapolation available, in turn, to the reader herself.

Fried's art-theoretical commentary, from *Absorption and Theatricality* (1980) to *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008), evolves from a concern with the objectively historical phenomenon of beholder-denial in Western art as it responds to the theatrical excesses of the baroque and takes on an austere moral quality, to an interest in the self-aware or politicised pursuit of this process in Edouard Manet and his generation, to an extended meditation on its function in photographic art mediated through Martin Heidegger. A microcosmic movement within this might be elucidated through reference to McGahern. Remarking again on the religious rituals of his rural childhood, the writer recalls, among other things, that '[the] stolidity of the long empty grave face was the height of decorum and profundity. Work stopped each day in shop and office and street and field when the bell for the Angelus rang out, as in the Millet painting.'⁸ This, one of several evocations of visual art which reflect the pictorial solidity of the writer's own imagery, refers to Jean-François Millet's *The Angelus* (1859), and hence to a painter whom Fried identifies as a precedent for the politicised absorption in repetitive mechanical ritual thematically present in works by Alphonse Legros. It is worth mentioning for Edmond Duranty's description of Legros's prayerful figures as capturing 'the rigid and machinelike stupidity that the painful and difficult existence of the poor gave to their crevassed faces'.⁹ *Rigid and machinelike* is not so far from stolid and empty, and such an observation complicates the association between beholder-denial and psychic interiority thus far prioritised here; it also, against the conceptual backdrop of Chapter One, enriches it, bringing a degree of historical materialism to bear on these rituals which hinge on absorption and induce self-alienation to a degree analogous to or compatible with the instrumentalisation of labour. As with strategic essentialism, it is the task of the critical reader to account for the affective properties of these images, and thus move towards a form of creative revision.

3.1 Quarantine

Once more, a tentatively ethical program underpins this. It particularly addresses the legacy of a series of exposés which took place in Irish public life throughout the 1990s and 2000s – in the realm of culture, Louis Lentin’s *Dear Daughter* (1996) and Mary Raftery’s *Suffer the Little Children* and *States of Fear* (1999), as well as works like Peter Tyrell’s posthumous *Founded on Fear* (2006), and, in the realm of legislation, the so-called Murphy, Ryan, Ferns, and Cloynes Reports – and dealt with the issues of clerical and lay sexual and physical abuse in Irish dioceses and carceral or caring institutions. In the present moment, this issue continues to be current, and especially to circle around the issue of child trafficking and mother-and-baby homes throughout the early decades of the post-independence state; ‘depressed, God-ridden times’ about which McGahern, in spite of certain readers’ insistence on constructing his depictions of religion as pastoral, has written explicitly and caustically.¹⁰ *The Dark*, as I will show, has become enmeshed in the ongoing intellectual and civic conversation about this putatively epochal aberration of ‘de Valera’s Ireland’, and the reading I propose to undertake here partly analyses how it functions in this.

To begin, a thought experiment. The so-called ‘antisocial thesis’ in queer theory, a countercultural call to challenge the futurological pastoralism of assimilatory politics, may be seen as one of several theoretical positions which seek to read culture, not merely for evidence of dissident sexualities, but also for a kind of enabling vacuity which emerges from the construction of queer motivations as ‘failure’ – or perhaps of failure as queer – where the arbitrations of value involved in this are normative, hierarchised, conservative, and implicitly capitalist in scope. It finds its major genesis in Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004), a work which takes aim at the politically dominant logic of heteronormativity by rejecting the cultural figure of the child as a sign ‘for the universal value attributed to political futurity’ – on encountering an example of anti-abortion propaganda in Massachusetts, consisting of ‘an enormous image of a full-term fetus on a

rented billboard accompanied by a simple and unqualified assertion: “It’s not a choice, it’s a child””, Edelman also proposes a critique of the foetocentric imaginary:

For the billboard, in this exemplary of the truths that right-wing discourse makes evident, understood what left-wing discourse prefers to keep concealed: that the true compulsion, the imperative that affords us as subjects no meaningful choice, is the compulsion to embrace our own futurity in the privileged form of the child and thereby to imagine the present as pregnant with the child of our identifications, as pregnant, that is, with a meaning to fill up the hole in the signifying order opened up by the distance, the internal division, produced through our subjection to the symbolic’s logic of “meaning” itself.¹¹

Reproductive futurism, ideologically registered by the child as a figure for political as well as biological futurity, also purifies this figure – ‘the Child’ – such that it mediates a form of sacralisation which Edelman interprets as ‘a fantasy of recapturing [the] lost imaginary unity’ underpinning the symbolic order. *Disidentification* from this means making a wilful concession to the construction of queerness as a series of figures ‘bodying forth, within the logic of narrative, the dissolution of that very logic’ – Edelman thus coins the neologism *sinthomosexual* to account for this. In Chapter One here, ‘green wounds’ were configured as a gendered and ethnic version of the *sinthomosexual*, and, while they do not lend themselves so well to neology, it is significant that Edelman should also choose an example aimed at women. The other disavowed by this billboard is not the homosexual male, but the female who is to be suborned to the claims of foetal citizenship, and although Edelman does not acknowledge this, it extends the *sinthomosexual* to include a deal of the abject energy I have associated with the *sinthome* of the ethnic feminine.

The thought experiment I would propose is a hypothetical application of the antisocial thesis to Irish culture. Almost at once, the playful grotesqueness of Edelman's provocative anti-politics becomes actually grotesque, since the idea of militating against the privileged right to futurity nominally awarded to children in a state with a recent history of organised biopolitical violence towards minors is objectionable in a way his original idea is not intended to be. We might say in its defence that Edelman is talking about a *symbol*; but then again, so are we. His best-known example – little orphan Annie – might be supplemented by the child-actor in promotional posters for Alan Parker's adaptation of *Angela's Ashes* (1999): this would be comparable to supplementing the plucky logic of the self-made American citizen with the sentimentalising of brutalised children at work in certain examples of 'misery literature'. In a way, this actually complements Edelman's broader contention that a symbolic investment in reproductive futurism does not serve the interests of real children. The 'child of our identifications' is not a real historical child but an emblem available for mobilisation in favour of a particular interpretative neutralisation of biopolitical violence within the context of the state. It is a eugenicist figure (the child of our identifications, like the foetal citizen, is white, able-bodied, and straight) and so at odds with an important aspect of reproductive culture in post-independence Ireland – namely, the fact that a ban on contraception obliged many women to undergo multiple pregnancies, effectively subtending a derogatorily ethnicised association with overproduction. McGahern's remarks on this are illustrative:

At this time, because of the power of the Church and the Church's teaching, many married without any sexual knowledge or knowledge of the person they were marrying. The men generally married for sex [...] The result was usually the arrival of a large number of children in rapid succession. There were families in which the children were cherished, but many more where they were resented as unwanted mouths that had to be fed, the unpleasant and unavoidable results of

desire [...] The ideal of society was the celibate priest. The single state was thus elevated. The love of God was greater than the love of man or woman; the sexual was seen as, [sic] sin-infected and unclean.¹²

The association drawn between children and abjected sexuality is reinforced by the writer's recollection of the practice of 'churaching', or the ritual re-admittance of women who had recently given birth into the congregation, as 'cleansed'. If Edelman's sinthomosexual is a boogiemer who menaces the privileged right to hygienic citizenship emblematised by 'the Child', 'churaching' abruptly reverses this by amalgamating the figure of the child, the postpartum woman, and the sexually abject; associations which, I would further argue, effect a gesture of homogenisation, whereby there is little distinction between sexual interaction between adults and the sexual exploitation of children. Elsewhere, commenting once again on post-independence society, McGahern remarks that '[childishness] was nurtured and encouraged to last a whole life long'; negating responsibility on a dangerous scale.¹³

The Dark, which Dennis Sampson defends against charges of pyric pessimism as 'an existential study of [an adolescent] consciousness in an indeterminate state', is also a work which discloses details of domestic and sexual abuse in a family cell.¹⁴ Critics and commentators have neglected to consider the banning in any detail; as Nolan argues, they have largely presented it as 'a *fait accompli* [with] little emphasis placed on understanding the events surrounding the affair despite its centrality to McGahern's life, work, and reception.'¹⁵ One hazard of this is the novel's revision as a 'watershed' moment in modern Irish history, a moment of revelation contending with an often hidden facet of Irish life, which is not borne out by the evidence Nolan collects. His survey of official and unofficial reaction, journalistic commentary, and anecdotal response indicates that McGahern's detractors and defenders were never explicit on the point of domestic or sexual abuse, with outrage centring instead on the writer's dismissal from his job as a

schoolteacher – which does not necessarily mean that readers *did not* pick up on the, potentially epochal or representative, depictions of intergenerational predation in *The Dark*. It does, however, suggest a lack of adequate language to account for these depictions *as* representative, and this qualification should be kept in mind when turning to a more recent piece of commentary by Fintan O'Toole. Writing in 2006, in light of the Murphy, Ryan, and Ferns Reports, all of which inventoried systematic abuse and cover-up in dioceses and Church-run institutions, O'Toole praises *The Dark* for performing a prescient feat of pedagogy by osmosis:

By accurately describing the human interiors of Ireland, McGahern helped to alter Ireland's sense of reality. The starkest example of this is the issue of child sex abuse. When it hit the headlines in the 1990s, it was spoken of as a stunning and awful revelation, a secret that hardly anyone knew. Yet it is there in black and white in *The Dark*, thirty years before. The book opens with the young protagonist, Mahoney, being forced to strip naked and bend over a chair to be beaten by his father, who derives a sexual pleasure from the act. Shortly afterwards, the boy is sexually abused by his father. Later, he stays in a priest's house and the priest comes into the room at night. The description is eerily like something that would be spoken aloud in *States of Fear* or the Ferns Inquiry. Such awful privacies were unspoken and, in the case of *The Dark*, unspeakable. Officialdom had no place for them, and though most Irish people knew about them, they did not want to really know them. But McGahern's calm persistence, his unrelenting integrity, drove them into our collective heads. The very conservativeness of the surface, the avoidance of shrillness or stridency, made the act of insinuation all the more explosive.¹⁶

O'Toole's discursive framing of abuse (a 'narrative' of progression from atavism to enlightenment) is blinkered in its address. None of the 'collective heads' involved belong to bodies that are, or have been, abused. Moreover, according to this vision, a novel of thwarted ambition becomes a herald of triumphalist normativity: its terminus is testament, when 'awful privacies' are catalogued and accorded status in public discourse. This absorption of extra-official insinuation into an officialdom shaped by humanist hang-wringing does not abolish, or even question, the existence of officialdom, nor undermine its arbitration of the knowable. Instead, the process by which 'most Irish people' initially insulated themselves against an 'awful' understanding is inverted: 'collective heads' – the body[less] politic – are thus quarantined against association with a culture of endemic abuse by dint of its otherness. *Conservativeness of surface* becomes the stuff of stealth instead of evidence for the banality of evil, and all that is abject and other in *The Dark* risks being politically neutralised.

It is helpful to compare this to another discursive attempt to recruit *The Dark* to a politics of aftermath. Peter Guy's 2010 article 'Reading John McGahern in light of the Murphy Report' has the peculiar virtue of not reading John McGahern in light of the Murphy Report, but rather of seeking to absolve the Church of any particular blame for the inheritance sketched in the Murphy Report. He effects this both by mobilising McGahern's pronouncements on the psycho-social values of religion and by interpreting the author's experience of abuse in the home as proof that the problem was not confined to the clergy. Thus McGahern's suggestion that 'People do not live in decades or histories' but rather in 'moments, hours, days' forecloses on 'retrospective judgment'; his construction of mid-century religious life as obsessed with sexual morality to the 'almost complete exclusion of the spiritual' is taken as writ, and his personal experience of abuse at the hands of his father is cited as proof of the existence of this practice among 'the laypeople'. Unsurprisingly, Guy has nothing to say about the ban on contraception which facilitated large families and, according to McGahern, 'resented' and mistreated children, nor about the fact that

this situation was enforced by the Church. Retrospective judgment is, in fact, employed by this critic to revise mid-century Ireland as a world of ‘traditional’ communities in which ‘the utter irrevocability of death [is] all the more bearable’ for the rituals of Christianity, and the ‘mercantile class’, presumably within fumbling distance of a greasy till, strikes a ‘bargain’ with the clergy to perpetuate a repressive status quo. The sole authority on all of this is John McGahern: in lieu of any primary historical source, Guy offers us an image of the writer as a public intellectual ‘perceptive of the exigent nature of clerical life’, as well as such turgidities as the fact that ‘the *episteme* dictates the nature of an offence’ or ‘[in] the new dispensations [sic], all that was good is tarred indiscriminately with the bad’. He also works to hail the reader as one whose relational obligations are not to the abused:

What was acceptable among the closed ranks of the hierarchy (both civil and clerical) in the 1960s is today regarded as a gross violation of trust. It is all that and more, but retrospective analysis is a dangerous preoccupation, because child abuse, as it is defined today, is “the mistreatment of a child...including physical violence, neglect, sexual assault or emotional cruelty.” Can anybody guess how many people would be dragged before the courts today if we applied retrospective judgment, using the aforementioned criterion [sic], on those who mistreated a child in the period after the inception of the state?¹⁷

Reader, it may even extend to you.

Guy’s invocation of mathematical sublimity here demands critique. We are being invited, if implicitly, to entertain the notion that the crime of ‘child abuse’ might be ‘dangerously’ extended to include people we relate to, identify with, and resemble: a movement which, far from revising our approach to normative behaviour in Irish society, instead makes of ‘abuse’ a null

category and constructs those who would call for it to be recognised as hysterical. We should respond with anger for obvious reasons, but also because McGahern is being invoked as an authority on this position, which makes evident the darker implications of a naively humanist approach that adopts the language of liberal inclusivity in the interests of a dominant group.

In a similar, if less pernicious, way, the ‘shrillness [and] stridency’ O’Toole credits McGahern with avoiding suggests the promiscuous surplus of definitions latent in Guy’s conception of child abuse as a legislative category. By comparison, the persistent integrity by which ‘collective heads’ are enlightened suggests a linear movement from darkness and obscurity to the transparency of a symbolic regime which now not only recognises abuse as a crime, but also enjoins a degree of interpretative consensus in the form of official, state-sanctioned, accounts, apologies, and tributes. Of these, the official ‘government apology’ proposed in the Ryan Report for inclusion on a public monument to victims of abuse in institutions – the monument, entitled *Journey Into Light*, has since been vetoed, although its title captures the persistence of a linear narrative or ‘journey’ to atonement in step with the state’s developmental destiny – registers this discursive emphasis on transparency, even as it quarantines normative citizenship against implication in abuse. ‘On behalf of the state and of all the citizens of the state, the Government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims of childhood abuse, for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue’: a sentiment which both suspends the citizen-status of the abused and, moreover, of abusers, and refrains from actually apologising for abuse itself.¹⁸ That a nominal celebration of vigilance entirely complements forms of social organisation metonymised by the panopticon, and present in the very carceral institutions under scrutiny, is curiously overlooked.

Journey Into Light represents an extension of O’Toole’s retelling of *The Dark*, and complements Guy’s revisionism. Each example works in the interests of one of two groups – the

clergy and the body politic, or normative citizenry, respectively – both of which are not constructed, in either instance, as containing those who have been targets of biopolitical and intimate violence in their ranks. This is not to say such groups are explicitly excluded, but rather that the terms of address employed by Guy and O'Toole do not, implicitly, refer to them, reproducing the impulse to quarantine at work in the government apology. Guy's commitment to the 'exigency' of clerical authority avoids acknowledging the structural injustices built into this, and every, hierarchical institution, and to acknowledge what Marie Keenan has described as 'organised irresponsibility' – a reflexive emphasis on solipsism, and an abstract or intellectualised approach to moral conduct, in clerical training, with the result that Keenan's interviewees and analysands, all convicted abusers, were 'unable to make good moral judgments in situations that required self-reflection, personal awareness, and the ability to put themselves in the shoes of other.'¹⁹ 'Lay', as Guy would have it, attempts to reduce institutional abuse to a clerical aberration are not, therefore, without truth either, since what is in evidence here is the exigencies of Catholic organisational culture – exigencies reproduced outside of this context, in the form of sovereign, secular, bureaucracy, which intersects with clerical organisation in the carceral institution.

Inhabitants of these institutions, which included industrial schools and orphanages, were not full members of the State at the time of their incarceration, but examples of what Giorgio Agamben has called 'bare life' – a state of embodied existence which has been overcoded by political economy to the point that it no longer simply exists *for itself*, but is disposed in some instrumental way towards the state without the privileges of citizenship. When biological life is not antecedent or adjacent but rather *central* to political life – at the conversion of material bodies to 'docile bodies' at the service of capitalism – it is no longer possible for the body to inhabit the condition which Agamben, after Aristotle, delineates as *zōē*, (the 'simple fact of living'). The body can only now be processed as *bios* ('the form or way of living proper to an individual or group'), and as such that any exclusion from the body politic does not restore pure life but recreates the

body as an altered or lesser life.²⁰ Among the most compelling implications of this are both the centrality of organisational strategies to the policing of biopolitical ‘stock’, and the subsequent production of non-docile, or structurally interpolated, bodies which possess neither autonomy nor the right to protection. This means that the social sub-category of bare life supplies a stock of bodies it is acceptable to abuse, or rather, in relation to which abuse is not recognised as abuse. The impulse to quarantine I have identified here should be considered alongside this.

An address which occludes victims in the interest of constructing a readerly subject-position outside of this category – and, in various ways, O’Toole, Guy, and the official apology address their readers in this way – is ethically remiss in much the same way as an official or populist conversation about reproductive autonomy which occludes women in the interest of the foetal citizen is, from a critical perspective, ethically remiss. To advocate a revised rhetoric of situatedness, however – to address victims or women, to speak *as* victim, or *as* woman, or as subaltern, et al – does not offset the particular structural problem inherent in it; namely, the fact that socialised or representative national *selfhood* does not, symbolically speaking, permit of or assimilate victimhood and feminisation (or feminised victimhood). Recognising the strategic adoption of human rights rhetoric and simultaneous, continued, nationalisation of anti-choice propaganda, Lisa Smyth observes that ‘[the] politicisation of women’s reproductive autonomy in the context of contemporary Ireland can be thought of as an important episode in the politics of authenticity, when the claim that a particularly gendered nationalism [is] successfully mobilized for political purposes’, a form of essentialism which cannot, I would contend, be militated against with ideas of the essential feminine.²¹

It is important to stress that the *sinthome* is apposite to this. The *sinthome* is artificial, and appeals to *jouissance* precisely because of the self-abdicating collapse into pleasure artificiality offers against the rooted and stable idea of authentic selfhood: being, coming, and spending are

immanent conditions. It reveals the artificiality of ideological programs without offering an improved form of authenticity in its place. The figure I would pit against this is not essentially feminine but *inauthentically* so. Relevant is Gayatri Spivak's dialogue with Derrida, and especially her gloss on the role of 'woman' in the scene of the latter's writing, which, 'from being a figure of "special interest"', occupies the place of a general critique of the history of Western thought' and is, crucially, 'taken, via Nietzsche, *as a name for citationality*' (my italics):

Women "acting out" their pleasure in the orgasmic moment, can cite themselves in their very self-presence. It is as if the woman *is* quotation marks and vice versa. If men think that they have or possess a woman in sexual mastery, they should be reminded that, by this logic, women can destroy the proper rolls between master and slave [...] Woman makes appropriation – the establishment of a thing in its appropriate property – undecidable.²²

Is this a good thing – or, rather, is this a productive point of departure for critique? Annamarie Jagose thinks not, since citationality is also the limit of this representative woman, a figure which remains 'generalised and defined in terms of the faked orgasm and other varieties of denial'; negatively delineated as the residual or sintho-matic woman of Lacanian analysis.²³ For Jagose, this devalues the feminine by casting it as unstable or contingent; for my purposes here, this is precisely the point, since the *crise pléthorique* of citationality must embrace its own negativity or inherent blankness, thus compromising the supposed authority of the ideological or symbolic. The orgasm 'cited' in self-presence is comparable to the lingering luridness of 'love of Ireland' over the corpse of Michael Collins: woman cites herself as woman, Lavery's *jouissance* cites itself as *jouissance*, and all is rendered spurious, performative, representational, or unstable. We might think of the green wound of the labile, Irish, mouth, which is also a sly mouth given, presumably, to flowery speech; in McGahern's *The Pornographer*, the anti-love object Josephine is both a fount

of performative orgasms and artificial garrulousness, quirks which work against readerly sympathy. As such no critical comment is made on the fact that her lover's confidante, a doctor who suggests that Josephine has become pregnant on purpose, ventriloquises her 'jeeringly' – 'Hit me now with the child in my arms' – and thus hints at the structural violence underpinning Josephine's life in this particular Ireland; a violence the protagonist is not subject to.²⁴

In spite of her reservations about Spivak, Jagose does invest in the capacities of the faked orgasm as a figure for productive estrangement within the politics of sexual difference, and I would further suggest that its counterfeit status as a sign, not for *jouissance* but for the standardised narrative of sexual normativity, might be compared to the degraded symbols for 'Ireland' discussed by Graham in Chapter One. Kitsch, for Morton, comes under the remit of dark ecology because it recognises abjection, and can stay the moment of disgust fomented by this, threatening those ideologies which first arbitrated signs and codes for national life – if we compare the faked orgasm, we similarly problematise the ideological narrative of female contingency on male agency. A faked orgasm, like a sound extracted from a mouth, an impersonal keen, a non-returned address, or a post-symbolic substance, articulates the alienation of human relations under the terms of dominant power structures and dispensations. After Negri, I have been proposing this kind of recognition of alienation as a starting-point for relational revision. While it may seem at best incongruous and at worst inappropriate to discuss orgasm and queer theory in the context of an enquiry into depictions of child abuse, this line of argument has a logic which is adjacent, rather than directly related, to it: to deconstruct heteronormativity and its psycho-social implications is to deconstruct a culture of biopolitical division and instrumentalisation, and is, furthermore, especially appropriate to McGahern's critiques of Irish masculinity. I will return to this, and consider its rhetorical extension, presently.

3.2 Screens

When the protagonist of Colm Toibín's 'The Use of Reason' (2007), a career criminal, recalls his adolescence at an industrial school named 'Lanfad', he also remembers a singular and epiphanic instance of violence that echoes the voyeuristic composition of the opening scene of *The Dark*. Two boys who have attempted to escape are forced to lay 'facedown on an old table with their trousers around their ankles', as a Christian Brother beats them 'across the buttocks [...] with a strap'. The protagonist witnesses this because he has climbed into a window from outside:

Suddenly, as he watched this scene, he noticed something else. There was an old light box at the back of the games room. It was used to store junk. Now there were two brothers standing in it, and the door was open so they had a clear view of the two boys being punished. He could see them from the window – Brother Lawrence and Brother Murphy – realising that the two Brothers administering the punishment must have been aware of their presence too but perhaps could not see what they were doing.²⁵

We hardly need to be told that the brothers in the light box are masturbating. Their eyes are 'fixed on the scene in front of them – the boys being punished, crying out every time they were hit with the strap', and, in this condition, they do not look like 'men in charge', but like 'old dogs panting'. Just as the image remains with the protagonist 'as if he had taken a photograph', it is presented to the reader as a suspended and hermeneutically saturated tableau – no explication, just composition – which must be interpreted iconographically.

Appearing two years after the Ryan Report, 'The Use of Reason' draws on a large store of public information regarding abuse; at the same time, the knowledge this bestows is partial.

Before and after the horizon of official history is introduced, the sole vector or author of the scene is the protagonist, who stands in another 'light box' channelling perspectival omniscience and taking in events without being seen. Such is the habitual privilege of the reading audience, who also observes unobserved, and makes a claim to total knowledge based on context and signification. There is no reciprocity, only volume, and a series of variously covetous and controlled gazes: the audience 'gazes' with the protagonist who gazes at the brothers in the light box who gaze at the punishment. This line of logic links the window, the light box, and the primary locus of action, which is the bodies – or rather, the buttocks – of the boys, in an apparatus of capture conditioned by what Michel Foucault has described as 'the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language'.²⁶ Because the image is like a 'photograph', however, it encompasses both the eideticism of the glance and the attention of the gaze, and the combined effect of these is authority – the reading subject knows what is happening, in the sense of being able to locate this scene historically and affirm its verisimilitude, without being explicitly told. In different but intersecting ways both of these revelations pertain largely, if not exclusively, to power relations, and pivot on the simulated or affective visual *transparency* offered, if not fetishised, by the scene. Nothing can happen without the window or the luminous force of both 'gazing' and plain language; emphasis is placed on comprehension rather than empathy. This is neither shocking nor inappropriate, but rather in accordance with the logic of bodily torture.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry, drawing on testimonies and reports of political torture, theorises the calculated or punitive pain inflicted in persecution as a means of objectifying or externalising power, or 'the conversion of absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power', which transforms the cutaneous surfaces of the body – its movements and expressions – into the signifying screen or *tabula* for the 'language' of power and submission.²⁷ From a political and a performative point of view this process crucially translates involuntary bodily movement, in conjunction with the deliberate or mechanical motions required to inflict pain, into a code that is

stable and legible, ‘made possible by the obsessive mediation of agency’: the body as cipher for the ‘incontestable’ binary of dominant and submissive or, moreover, of *subject and object*.²⁸ The tortured body’s status as an object is effectively mounted *on* it, as a sign, such that visible or palpable reactions to stimuli are instantly processed by an abstract system which both requires and tyrannises the object of its expression. An internal or personal experience of pain as what Bersani, in an entirely separate context, describes as ‘self-shattering’, contributes to this process of objectification whereby the tortured body cannot but concede to its *own* status as an object subject to the superior agency of the torturer. Scarry spatialises this:

It is the intense pain that destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and subject.²⁹

In ‘The Use of Reason’, the bodies of the boys who are beaten are treated of briefly, and it is significant that theirs is the only gaze not, apparently, levelled at anything; neither require development as characters because they serve as representatives for the wider body of boys incarcerated at the school. In spite of this, their bodily presence or objectivity – their bodies *as objects* and not subjects, since we have no access to their consciousness and are not directed, ‘visually’, toward their faces – function as the central point of application in the scene.

Posture, indispensable to sadomasochism as much as to choreography or figurative art, ‘unites only one action and its bodily point of application’, and sustains a tension between gesture

and surface; we are given the boys' posture explicitly, they are 'facedown', such that focus is narrowed to their exposed buttocks.³⁰ Capital punishment is not always, or even usually, confined to this particular permutation: as anecdote and allegation would have it hands, backs, ribs, and even feet also feature as the loci of assault, whilst McGahern's 'The Recruiting Officer' vividly reconstructs 'the whistle and thud' of electric wire used to beat a schoolboy on the legs.³¹ There are numerous ways in which bodies might be ritually mortified but the quality of articulacy attendant upon the beating detailed here is a condition of its figural starkness: a prostrate posture communicates subservience and suggests feminisation by dint of its receptive sexual function.³² The buttocks, a site of reception for the simulated thrusting of the beating itself, confirms this association, which is unlikely to be lost on the reader. As these bodies are bent in reception, what they receive are not only blows from the strap but the perspectival lines of several gazes; that of the masturbating brothers, and that of the protagonist. Force is diluted in strength as it travels, and the ordered aggression of the beating is processed as a surrogate penetration or phantasmatic intimacy by the Brothers in the light box, to be processed (gridded) anew as a more diffuse or abstract composition by the protagonist and the reading subject. Violence, then, is a condition of form *and* content in this scene: a violence of 'the field of spectatorship' – which is also 'the field of civilisation' because the field of signification – *and* of the cutaneous field, of both the buttocks and the posture which exposes it in this way.³³ This posture is, in turn, contextualised by and contingent on the room in which it occurs, as the room is a frame, the light box is a frame, the window is a frame, the page is a frame, and the final or primal framing device that facilitates all of it is the body itself – just as nothing can be 'seen' without the window, there can be no meaning without the 'screen' of flesh onto which pain-as-power is inscribed. The structural obligation to apprehend and thus co-produce an image discussed above underpins this, ensuring that the reader/viewer is involved, or complicit, in it.

What creates a screen or tabula? Or, to put this differently, what is the difference between a vacuum and a screen or frame or tabula, or grid, where both of these forms of spatialisation are essentially identified by their emptiness, and hence receptivity? The answer, in Foucault's influential meditation on *Las Meninas*, is light, the 'common locus' of pictorial representation.³⁴ In *The Dark*, the symbolic conspicuousness of light (of enlightenment, of electrification, of the 'heavenly mansion' of Yeats's 'The Choice', from which its title is taken) is charged with meaning; in Toibín's short story, nothing could happen without the light box, and this particular detail emphasises readerly involvement or 'gazing' as a form of 'light' or *enlightenment*. Light and enlightenment – and I am thinking here of the official, strategic enlightenment implied by the government apology – are somewhat conflated in 'The Use of Reason', since this encounter with the window and light box allows the protagonist to toughen further into a shrewd social analyst and cynic, made aware of the demographic rung he occupies, and fomenting a desire to climb higher. At the same time, this image of the boys who are beaten and the brothers who masturbate appears, in the life of the protagonist, to represent a trauma: as an adult, he is successful but mistrustful, and probably modelled on the ill-fated gangland leader Martin Cahill. We can, then, question our presumption of comprehension and understanding on encounter with this scene as a picture reconstructed and mediated in Toibín's story. We can choose to dis-identify, not with the boys who are beaten (these figures are already beyond our identification; we can only encounter them as *other*), but with the representative socialised self, the readerly avatar problematically proposed by the protagonist, who represents, in this instance, *the enlightened omniscience of the reader as (Irish) social actor*. Put simply, I may have read the Murphy and Ryan reports, may form part of a body politic implicated in such symbolic acts of acknowledgement as *The Journey Into Light*, but to believe myself to be sufficiently 'enlightened', to reduce the content of this phenomenon to the adequated categories of social experience, is to convert 'awful privacies' into public knowledge presumptuously, positivistically, and possibly violently.

There is an alternative means of critically approaching this scene through the vector of light or luminescence. Bersani's reading of enigmatic address in visual art, outlined in 'Beauty's Light', proposes an association between light and conscious presence, light and affective reception, light and the reader or beholder as inducted into a relational scheme which, as in the case of barefoot Susan, allows the observer to 'light' upon the other and acknowledge, not a coherently comprehensible affinity, but a *disconnecting link* that allows the other to retain a share of mystery. In this case, then, a conspicuously visible grid or composition enjoins an opacity which contradicts the claims to knowledge associated with a scopic regime – although, of course, to approach it in this way is to make a *critical choice* to do so, and to resist exhaustive schemes or formulae for interpreting a painting, or a vision of aggressively mediated pain, or a textual scene. The beholder, arrested before the scene, must engage with this opacity, and is thus potentially open to the possibility that 'the affective force of [such] moments might be deployed to propel ethical generosity'.³⁵ In the case of Toibín, such a reading practice would mean attending to the semantic obstruction or sintho-matic implications presented by the 'screen' of flesh mobilised, here, to inscribe mastery. It would mean, in a way, deconstructing or dis-identifying with phenomenological 'Thirdness': a means of taking direction or interpreting an image or sign under *instruction*, in this case, 'as' a representative depiction of Irish child abuse; a disclosure, an image of visual 'truth'. Such dis-identification involves reading the scene, instead, as artificial, representative, or *citational*: as a problematically standardised *sign for a signified* which is absent because it is perceived to be 'past' or historical, because the subjectivity of victims is often occluded, and because its *signs* (official reports, official apologies, popular consensus) form part of an interpretative discourse which seeks to manage affective response in a way conducive to political economy. This is the approach I am proposing for the opening scene of *The Dark*.

3.3 *The Dark*

“Say what you said because I know.”

The first demand of *The Dark* registers its core thematic and structural tenet of confession; what Foucault, appropriately here, has described as the ‘dark twin’ of torture, and interpreted as a means of articulating a relation to mastery:

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us, on the contrary, it seems to us the truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface, that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom: traditional themes in philosophy [...] would have to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free – nor error servile – but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power. The confession is an example of this.³⁶

Foucault’s point here subtends the interest in transparency and revelation which has characterised certain ‘narratives’ of abuse in Irish culture; the production of truth through testament and confession. This, as I have shown, underwrites an arc of development which must be exclusive, and which works to preserve normative citizenship against implication with it. To critique it, we can begin with the putative ‘truth’ which results from the ostensibly omnipotent *Urvater*, Old Mahoney’s, demand for confession in this scene, the scrambled or obscured word ‘F-U-C-K’: a word made strange by censorship and converted into a kind of object-trigger, extending its

associations with displaced violence onto ‘the heavy leather strap he used for sharpening his razor’. This strap twitches uncannily like ‘an animal’s tale’ and is used to threaten a son who has uttered a phallic word with surrogate castration (‘I’ll cut that arse off you’) and surrogate penetration (‘Into that chair with you. On your mouth and nose. I’ll give your arse something it won’t forget in a hurry’). These gestures are counterfeit gestures, or fantasies; when O’Toole, above, describes the protagonist as being ‘beaten’ by his father, this detail is technically incorrect, since the belt ‘never comes’. Instead, it collides with the leather seat on which Young Mahoney lies prostrate, exploding like ‘a rifle crack’ against the armrest to redouble the military associations of the father (‘March, march, march’) whilst proposing a field of prosthetic flesh in the form of the chair and the belt, both made of leather.³⁷

This scene is also sodomitical in a way wholly different to the scenes identified by theorists like Bersani or Edelman. Instead of disrupting the ideological overcoding of sexual hexis identified by Pierre Bourdieu, the opening scene of *The Dark* – an eruption which sets the tone for the rest of the novel – excessively illustrates it, or illustrates it *as excessive*, an effect borne out in at least one rather remarkable critical response:

A number of fairly specific forces constrain the characters [of *The Dark*]. Perhaps chief among these is the dead mother of the family. Her absence facilitates a grinding and remorseless emphasis on the petty viciousness, the frustrations and lovelessness in the relations between a man bereft of sexual love, and his children, bereft of maternal love.³⁸

The suggestion that the absence of a ‘good woman’ to interpose, as a kind of sexual shock-absorber, between a man and his children is the ‘chief’ explanation for abuse is both objectionable and inadvertently, even sintho-matically, revelatory. That Michael Toolin, the critic

quoted, does not intend to say this but says it anyway means that it may be thought of as a slip or a tic; which is to say as a symptom, disclosing something of the brutality of the family cell as it radiates outwards from the father-figure, the arbiter of phallic plenitude, in a gesture which is, like narrative, linearised – beginning with the sexual subject and terminating in a sexual object that exists *for* the subject, and is passive. It is true that Old Mahoney relates to his son, on at least one occasion in *The Dark*, as a surrogate wife, sharing a bed with him and attempting to engage in a fantasy of sentimental omnipotence (“There’s no need to be afraid or cry. Your father loves you”) which obscenely idealises his attachment to the role of ‘father’ and the power that comes with this. Old Mahoney must be written off as aberrant by Toolin because his excessive investment in this normative role betrays an adjacent fantasy that is barely concealed by the received discourse of platitudes and truisms he inhabits; at the same time, his insistence on this speech pattern, which is alternately vicious and sentimental, obliges the reader to interpret his actions against the grain of his self-constructed subject position and engage with it *as* a fantasy. As such, when Old Mahoney underscores the ideological edifice of the family by presenting its inevitability as a thing of common sense, claiming that ‘Even Up Above there was trouble. There’s differences everywhere [...] Everyone loses their temper and says things and does things but as long as you know there’s love there is doesn’t matter’, we are aware of both the banality of this proclamation and its radical incommensurability with what is actually taking place between father and son.³⁹

Fantasy, Slavoj Žižek contends, is conducive to ideology, not only because it stages a pseudo-transgressive interlude which, like the carnivalesque, restores and resigns itself to reality, but also because, in awarding ‘[all] power to the imagination’, fantasy indulges the more ruthless libidinal impulses fomented in the tension between superego and id.⁴⁰ This amalgamation of life-force and death-drive (*jouissance*) manifests as an injunction to *enjoy* ideology, and, in the economy of novelty underpinning capitalism, this kind of fantasy – that which ‘teaches us how to desire’ – has many obvious applications.⁴¹ Commodity fetishism, for instance, hails the subject as nothing

but a nexus of desires and thus obscures the critical choice inherent in abstractions like market logic; to say that this constitutes stupefaction seems judgmental, but libidinal fantasy is, to a significant degree, *stupid*, in that it cannot be translated or communicate symbolically. The answer to the question of ‘why I want’ is ‘just because’ since, when contingent factors are stripped away, what remains is the injunction to enjoy, and this enjoyment is not always a form of consumption. Where the ideological dispensation is one of ascetic self-denial *jouissance* might be glimpsed in masochism. Where it is fascist, we have become used to explaining historical violence as a fantasy of excess linked less to the ongoing exigencies of authority than the aberrations of a generation whose signifiers are revised as erotic props, helping to discredit wasted manifestations of key ideological prerequisites by allowing these to ossify into the self-reflexive fantasies of kitsch.

Jouissance as it interacts with ideology has been defined as an over-identification with those ‘joins’ in a superstructure which are normally mystified; as has been shown, it can serve to menace ideology, especially when decanted into the *sinthome*, or stillborn sign. In *Ulysses*, the compulsive *agenbite of inwit*, broken down into *bite* and *wit* and as such to ‘the bite of the [Freudian] joke, the bite of the unconscious’, is an example pointedly foregrounded by Lacan. We might compare it to another ‘bite of the unconscious’, the ‘worm of the triple sting’ in the sermon delivered by Stephen’s Jesuit counsellor, who, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, generates so much theological static that it becomes, in the end, ridiculous or kitsch. Stephen’s response, a dream of scat and anthropomorphised goats, models the association between fantasy (meditation), ideology (Catholicism) and the irruption of the *sinthome* as an idiotic kernel (the dream) sustaining an ideological field by taking it to its most dully literal conclusion. The ‘sting’ here is not that of conscience but of an injunction for the unconscious to enjoy its baser nature; the fulfilment of fantasy is not an escape but a derangement of those aspects of ideology which are usually held at a distance but concretised, in the *sinthome*, as obscene.

Sigmund Freud's 'A Child is Being Beaten' is a study of sexual fantasy which allegorises this particular image. It is hard to fathom the beating of children as a popular fantasy now, and there is a sense in which Freud's patients, who attach 'feelings of pleasure' to their identikit 'phantasy', are responding to a form of paternal authority in its earliest domestic articulation – siblings and schoolmates being beaten 'on the bare buttocks' by figures who all, for Freud, metonymise the ur-father. Female analysands, always already proximate to masochism, are beaten by their father, whereas male analysands may fantasise about being beaten by their mother, but even this is devolved symbolically by Freud to place the *pater familias* in the position of authority. This beating, moreover, stands in for or constitutes a primitive version of genital love:

[The] original form of the unconscious male phantasy was not the provisional one that we have hitherto given: "I am being beaten by my father," but rather: "*I am loved by my father.*" The phantasy has been transformed by the processes with which we are now familiar into the conscious phantasy: "*I am being beaten by my mother.*" The boy's beating is therefore passive from the very beginning, and is derived from a feminine attitude towards his father [...]⁴²

The consequence of this is irradiated by both subsequent revelations of child abuse as a phenomenon and the legacy of claims that Freud suppressed evidence of inter-generational abuse by naturalising the family romance: '*The beating-phantasy has its origin in an incestuous attachment to the father*' (italics in original). The anchoring of quotidian masochism in the narrative of heteronormativity also has the effect of endorsing a vision of sexual congress which, in its amplified symbolic form, is essentially violent, consisting in the application of an action (spanking/thrusting) to the flesh – a gesture which, theoretically, negates or dissimulates gender. This is not to say that being penetrated is defined, by Freud and by the broader ideology of gender difference, as anything other than constitutively feminine, but rather to emphasise the

ambivalence which is glimpsed in this depiction of masochism. Analysands' focus on 'bare buttocks' may also be nuanced, since this is the site of the anal 'cut' which Edelman considers a symbolic appendage related, but not identical, to the wound of castration: a 'penetrable hole' that presents a threat to heteronormativity by declaring the penetrability of the male subject as well as the female.⁴³ Precisely what makes this threatening is its association with the figure of the penetrable woman which must symbolise passivity, both as a social actor and through bodily hexis, or 'political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition'.

I have said that censorship is signalled or anticipated at the beginning of *The Dark*, in the defamiliarisation of 'fuck' as 'F-U-C-K'. Since this word 'just came out' – 'The filth that's in your head came out, you mean' – it is very much a symptom, or accidental, wayward, and involuntary expression of the unconscious meeting a symbolic terminus in obscenity; as such, it is, for the protagonist Young Mahoney, de-cathected, or disconnected from the unconscious through the process of its (deformed) symbolic articulation. The symptom is that which cannot be translated and, as both a *linguistic* symptom and a *sinthome*, 'fuck' or 'F-U-C-K' in this instance is entirely without a communicational trajectory. Any meaning or any cathexis we may invest it with is excessive or supplementary, which is to say *fantastical*. That the beating doesn't come but remains imaginary does not diminish the horror of the scene or the son's self-evident terror of his father, but it does lodge this non-scenario firmly in the realm of fantasy, where, as we have seen, the clean lines of ideology are stretched and distended by *jouissance*, producing effects that both register the pleasures of ideological identification and threaten to expose ideology as ridiculous or opaque. Thus the immovable, impenetrable, and untranslatable tic of 'fuck' becomes the dull medial substance of several immanent interpretative investments. Its meaninglessness is the non-logic of a scene constructed, at the objectively symbolic level of ideology, as following from a transgression – from the son's utterance of the word 'fuck' – but not actually elaborating on or substantiating that transgression ('I didn't say anything'). On the surface, Old Mahoney is

punishing his son because the latter has uttered a taboo word; beneath this surface, at the level of 'our dirty fantasmatic imagination', he is actually punishing 'the filth that's in your head', which is to say *all taboo*; all that must remain below the level of language, and which surfaces only in the dissimulating obscenity of the symptomatic tic.⁴⁴ Mahoney's narrative of paternal duty seizes, with surreptitious bad faith, on the ideological imperative to govern one's family in the context of a society which radiates outwards from the nuclear family, taking this cell as its most primary structural unit (or 'join'). It also echoes, in a more conscious way, Freud's palimpsestic overlaying of the 'child beating' fantasy with the script of the family romance, a gesture which suppresses or negates the implication that child-beating is, in and of itself, a source of arousal for adults.

It might also be said that, in embracing his paternal authority to such a grotesque degree, Old Mahoney 'dissects' and lays bare the darker truth of the *Urvater*, and its descendant patriarchal order – not consciously or heroically, but a way that is accidental, a hazard of over-emphasis, and left, ultimately, for the reader to 'dissect'. By the end of *The Dark*, this beaten child has grown to a man who asserts, while lying in bed with the father who has, in the past, exploited him sexually, that 'I wouldn't have been brought up any other way or by any other father', a conclusion which irritated critics and continues to be objected to.⁴⁵ John Cronin's "The Dark' is not Light Enough' is an article from 1969 which, in common with other early responses to *The Dark*, interprets the novel as 'not successful' in its attempt to further detail the 'dark conditions of [a] fictional universe' executed 'perfectly' by *The Barracks*.⁴⁶ McGahern's failure, for Cronin, is moreover a failure of form. The 'stygian universe' Young Mahoney inhabits is too unrelenting, and not illuminated by sustaining flashbacks or middle-aged wisdom, as in *The Barracks*, and as such lacks perspective; unlike James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which make of Stephen Dedalus as pessimistic but successful human subject because '[Joyce] employs a high-flown rhetoric which both carries the youthful arrogance and simultaneously undercuts it'.⁴⁷ In the 'high-flown' rhetoric Cronin praises in Joyce we find a particular regard for pedagogical

heritage as a point of access for the protagonist who comes to socialised authority via induction but not indoctrination: McGahern's protagonist, by contrast, is violently indoctrinated to the 'stygian universe'. His early acceptance of defeat, and of 'calmness even in the face of the turmoil of your own passing', is indeed unearned and premature. It is significant, however, that Cronin does not find the stygian universe structure to be anomalous where it occurs in *The Barracks*, for the principle reason that, in this work, it is more persuasively scaffolded and graduated; the difference in *The Dark* is that Young Mahoney's anti-triumph refutes such measured and thus defensible pessimism, becoming instead penetrated or filled by it passively, finding victory in this receptive and essentially feminine gesture.

We might say that Young Mahoney's surrender is precisely what the 'stygian universe' demands of him, and the fact that Cronin goes so far as to interrogate McGahern himself on this point indicates, perhaps, the degree of urgency or instability this poses to the 'real world' of Irish society – especially since the *bildungsroman*, and the *Portrait*, are associated with a kind of nationalised apprenticeship, whereby the youth learns to inhabit a role in public culture. If we take the liberty of conflating the 'stygian universe' with the cultural climate of post-independence Ireland, its lack of resolution also becomes politically pertinent. An underdeveloped comparison, by Cronin, with *The Catcher in the Rye* provides a last possibility for insight; where Holden Caulfield's language is so 'larded with kid-phrases' it remains, to a degree, unable to absorb the full severity of the world he encounters, ensuring a sense of readerly distance, Young Mahoney's voice and textual presence is so permeated with the oppressive existential tenure of his world that it becomes, in itself, opaque. This results in the sudden change of heart, as Young Mahoney leaves university, which has been criticised by Cronin and others as lacking a credible motivation. It is, instead, unclear or 'unsuccessful' – 'stubbornly inhospitable' – and as such forecloses on any satisfying consensus regarding the intentional program of *The Dark*.⁴⁸

3.4 Fantasy

The fantasies of Francis McGahern, as he is recycled through his various avatars in McGahern's work and ultimately fleshed-out biographically in *Memoir*, pivot around his perceived status as a victim or exception; that he has, especially in the guise of Michael Moran of *Amongst Women*, been accepted as such by some critics constitutes a subtending or nuancing of this neurosis in the realm of political and historical commentary. Moran, who makes a short and much-cited speech about his disillusionment, as an ex-guerrilla commander, with post-independence Ireland – 'What did we get for it? A country, if you'd believe them. Some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen [...] What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod'⁴⁹ – and, later, obstructs his daughter's attempts at taking a university scholarship because 'It was the priest and the doctor and not the guerrilla fighters who had emerged as the bigwigs in the country Moran had fought for [and] For his own daughter to lay claim to such a position was an intolerable affront'⁵⁰, has been revised as a wronged or traumatised, but finally dignified, figure by both Stanley Van der Ziel and Robert Garratt. Van der Ziel's commentary on Moran's character as it is forged in response to the waning of idealism is representative of an influential, even reflexive, strain of interpretation which slots Moran and Francis into a narrative:

Moran has with time grown sceptical of the orthodoxies of romantic nationalism of his youth, and become "too complicated" to accept its simplistic, emotionally charged myth – or lie – of the glories of heroism, blood-sacrifice, and immortality through the remembrance of heroic deeds (as rehearsed by McQuaid's idealised recollections of the War on Monaghan Day in the novel, or Patrick Pearse's rhetoric of 1916).⁵¹

It is not that this summation is necessarily wrong, but rather that it responds to a vision of recent history which can itself be deconstructed as an ideological bloc. In the first, there is little evidence in *Amongst Women* that Moran conceives of his dissent in this kind of detail; the complexity of his character is, rather, manifest in the irrational but predictable cycle of symptoms (anger, violence, and charm) better mined, in *Memoir*, as proof of trauma or of an ‘actor’ occupying a social and familial role with self-conscious, ironic, and occasionally calculating intent. Moran has been compared to the ‘father of the nation’, Eamon de Valera, but he is also a kind of anti- or excessive de Valeran figure, making literal, at a domestic level, those proscriptions and prohibitions inherent in sovereign authority: in wishing to humiliate his youngest son by beating him before ‘the house’, a proposal which ensures his authority as the centre of family reaches as far as his daughters’ civil service colleagues in Dublin, Moran achieves a degree of amplification and consensus which betrays, if briefly, the relation between his allegedly hermetic (or ‘stoical’) cosmos and the greater normative entity of the state. Michelle Kennedy has reread the fathers of McGahern’s fiction as displaying ‘what Jean-Paul Sartre refers to as *mauvaise foi* or bad faith [by] creating an elaborate self-delusion’ which presupposes ‘the existence of the Other *for me*’; this is also the primary imposition of masculine subjectivity in Lacan – a false unity contingent on constructing and seducing the (female) other so that it complements the subject’s ideal ‘self’ – and is reflected, in McGahern’s works, every time a father defines himself only in relation to his family.⁵²

For Moran, whose motherless family constitutes a ‘larger version of himself’, this sense of masculine subjectivity both ordained and whetted in relation to a subservient, but necessarily present, other, is sustained, once more, at the somewhat literal level of speech. In the early pages of *Amongst Women*, his daughters collectively authenticate his presence by speaking back his history, whether by mimicking his own discursive ‘handrails’ into the past or, in the case of the characteristically vehement Sheila, by addressing with ‘borrowed vehemence’ Moran’s own

version of his personal history: ‘They say you should have gone to the very top in the army after the war but you were stopped.’⁵³ Soon after, when the women of the family are eating together without the ailing Moran, he summons their attention dramatically by shooting a jackdaw from his bedroom window – an act Garratt reads as proof of Moran’s lingering post-war trauma, but which might just as well be interpreted as a compensatory claim to phallic authority executed, with a certain metaphorical bombast, to the sole end of reasserting dominance. As he weakens, of course, Moran is growing ‘afraid’ of his daughters; although they speak back his history, and although he has, throughout their life at Great Meadow, policed their speech, this capacity to speak together and controvert the house register of deference can be turned against him – these daughters also mimic Moran, and, towards the end of his life, oppress him with verbal demands which are presented, in the first stage of the novel, as vocalised by no single daughter, but rather by all three (‘You’ll have to shape up, Daddy. You can’t go on like this.’) Their authority is, at this point, also a feminine one, as ‘Since they had the power of birth there was no reason why they couldn’t will this life free of death’, a potent possibility which leaves Moran, once more, in ‘fear’, and, while this can and has been read as relating to the ascension of *Mná na hEireann* at the advent of late modernity, it is equally politically relevant to read, at its base, the more elemental exigencies of sovereign, and reflexively masculine, subjectivity.⁵⁴ For all of Moran’s stoicism his selfhood is not wholly monistic and relies, to a significant degree, on ‘[relinquishing] some or all of [his] ontic presence to the world of meaning generated by the other’, a risk that is unavoidable and especially relevant to the act of writing, through which Moran, addressing his children and especially his absent son Luke, must place himself at risk – of rejection, or of the silence which Luke, another possessor of masculine authority, imposes on him.⁵⁵ Since Luke has been making of himself ‘a kind of Englishman’, there is an ethnic inflection to this pitting of garrulousness (one of Moran’s great ontic ‘risks’) against the power of refusal; in declining to allow his father to feminise him, either by beating him and otherwise dominating him in a domestic context, or by determining his relation as other to Moran’s ‘self’, Luke turns this indelibly gendered binary back

on his father – a father who, at the end of his life, cries ‘*Shut up!*’ against his daughters’ assumption of verbal power as they pray over him, but who fails in this final attempt at usurpation and is subject to an *aphanisis* of agency: “He may be gone home but he’ll always be with us,’ Maggie spoke for them all. ‘He’ll never leave us now.’”⁵⁶ This, in its own sinister, because sentimental, way, subtends (and perverts) Moran’s own demand that his life be experienced as a ‘continuing presence’ without shadow (without contour; without reflection, and also without shelter) or challenge. I disagree with Garratt’s suggestion that this paranoid present-tense results obliquely from trauma caused by the war, and feel the deficit of masculine entitlement hinted at by Van der Ziel and Holland comes closer to the mark, not because this would satisfy a less sympathetic reading of Moran but rather because this haunting lack pervades McGahern’s works and presents itself symptomatically via a number of opaque motifs.⁵⁷

The first point to be made about this is that readings of Moran as a disappointed hero or conscientious objector both explicitly discredit ‘heroic’ masculinity and remain indebted to its prerequisites. Moran is invoked a vehicle for the deflation of sacrificial ‘heroism’ but not of sovereign masculinity, the thwarting of which in favour of effeteness (‘Many of them who had pensions and medals and jobs later couldn’t tell one end of a gun from the other’)⁵⁸ is in fact under criticism. Van der Ziel’s choice of Patrick Pearse, for instance, is more significant than it seems, since Pearse’s posthumous reputation (now, if not quite in the late 1940s setting of *Amongst Women*) is not one of normative masculinity but of excessive symbolic plenitude reduced, through sheer exhaustion and ‘the inevitable declension of the icons of nationalism into kitsch’, to something as queer as a two-dollar bill; something which, when placed beside Moran, irradiates the phantasmal Francis in a more challenging way. The immensity of unfinished business between McGahern and the father he leaves, in *Memoir*, ‘with God, or whatever truth or illusion or longing for meaning or comfort that word may represent’, forms a large part of the impetus behind his writing, and where such a patrilineal fracture emerges between James and the

irascible John Joyce, Jacques Lacan accounts for it as Joyce's primary symptom, an *idée fixe* which deranges the law (and language) of the father.⁵⁹ Francis the *fascist*, metonymised by his Crombie overcoat and Garda uniform, by his shining buttons, his belts, his razors, his keys, and his guns, is a figure or figment which potentially enters into the erotic economy of 'the boot in the face' with which Sylvia Plath registers 'Daddy' as an obscene emblem of National Socialism.

I would like to briefly visit a scene from *Amongst Women*, and to pay attention to a certain aspect of its reception, which is registered most coherently in Van der Ziel's 'Fionn and Oisín in the Land of Wink and Nod' (2005), and which echoes, less awkwardly, the humanist impulses at work in Toolin's analysis of *The Dark*. In the case of *Amongst Women*, this takes the forms of the 'disillusionment' thesis, which proposes that Moran, a veteran of the War of Independence who now lives in isolation and reigns over his family, experiences 'deep psychological difficulties, as well as social disappointments, in adapting to life in an independent Ireland which he knows he has been instrumental in bringing about [...] but in which he nevertheless feels to have been disenfranchised', and these reflect broader historical truths in the aftermath of independence.⁶⁰ Moran's case for the cruelty of this situation is compelling, but it later transpires that much of his disenfranchisement arises from personal resentment at not ascending socially in a culture which, it seems, has taken exception to his ornery personality – as opposed to his daughter and sons, who must leave to find work, and whose plight is less self-imposed. Van der Ziel contends that this 'lost generation' is 'still an important theme' in a novel morbidly dominated by Moran's presence 'even though – and perhaps precisely *because* – it does not comprise its subject-matter *per se*', as its author initially intended. Arguably, McGahern's presentation of this theme as peripheral in fact reproduces the androcentric compulsions of patriarchy, which, in this instance, assign Moran's daughters a marginal position because their culture, like their father and, it seems, like many readers, is not interested in their lives as anything other than marginal matter. Just because the novel finds in Moran a dark centre of thematic gravity, however, does not mean we as readers

have no responsibility to nuance this. For all of his charisma, Moran is not one of ‘the handful of visionary intellectuals’ who dreamed of a better reality at the outset of revolutionary violence; from what we can gather, he, like Francis, belonged to the class of young and economically insecure column leaders who gained status during the conflict by trading on their military skill.⁶¹ Ascension to the middle class should, and did, follow. Moran’s quarrel with the ‘small-minded gangsters’ who gained power in the Free State appears to arise from a sense of entitlement and a rather academic approach to the obliged emigration of ‘more than half’ of his family – their departure, especially that of his eldest son Luke, shrinks his sphere of domestic influence. My reading is less generous than Van der Ziel’s, but there is a risk that sympathy for Moran disguises the degree of structural violence underwriting his position, and recreates him in an image wholly amenable to the tone of enforced resignation and pessimism which characterised official Irish life following independence, in the context of which a dampening of ardour in favour of more prosaic interests is hardly countercultural. A tendency to side with Moran at the expense of his intimate victims also risks restating a preference for the inheritances of men where the question of Irish sovereignty is concerned, and approach which fails to account for the feminised or queer implications of social devaluation, trauma, disillusionment, and other potentially haunting forms of failure on display throughout McGahern’s advanced critiques of traditional masculinity.

Towards the beginning of this novel, Moran and his ex-army comrade McQuaid discuss their time together in a flying column during the War of Independence (see quotation, above). As they reminisce about a bloody ambush, life on the road, and departed friends, a racier memory of this shared past is brought up:

‘Do you remember Eddie McIniff in Maguire’s garden on night watch?’ McQuaid asked. ‘He could see all the roads from Maguire’s garden. We were watching in case the Tans would try to infiltrate the lake at night. Eddie used to shoot a lot of

duck and could stand like a stone. One of the Maguire girls – Ellie or Molly, I think it was Molly, they were all fine looking, tall women – came out to do her morning business and hunkered down under an apple tree a few feet away from Eddie. All Eddie did was to wait a bit and then lean over without a sound and lay the gun barrel across her back cheeks. I'd love to have seen her face when she jumped,' McQuaid laughed out loud. 'There must be nothing colder on a bare arse than a gun barrel that was out all night.'⁶²

Moran, in response, may look 'helpless with the weight of his own disapproval', but the subsequent question of 'Didn't you have something to do with one of those Maguire girls?' places him, as well as Eddie McNiff, in a position to realise the sexual act phantasmally supplemented here by a simulated sexual assault. 'The rest of us had to scape and scrounge for the girls, Michael,' McQuaid continues, 'but whatever you had they always fell into your hands like ripe plums', making use of a phrase associated, some ten years later, with the rapist John Quinn in *Rising Sun*. The troubling triangulation of phallic gunman, fatherly authority, and a blending of both of these in Moran may be seen to suggest the commensurability of violence and patriarchal dominance in an instant which is, if briefly, presented as a pictorial composition ('I'd love to have seen her face'). We might note the recurrence of apple trees in certain anxious instances – Fraser Woods attempts to hang himself from one, barefoot Susan appears at the mouth of an orchard, and, here, Ellie or Molly is inserted into a compositional instant which suggests assault through negation or displacement, and which centres, in terms of legibility or putative translucence, on a screen of flesh (the buttocks), the application of a gesture, and the symbolic inscription of mastery. The spectre of the opening scene of *The Dark* is present here, whilst the more explicit composition of 'The Use of Reason' might be brought to bear on it, in addition to a work of visual art I have had in mind throughout this chapter, and will briefly discuss with the aim of drawing the strands of what is a highly associative argument together.

3.5 *I'm For Yous*

Alienation has been an important issue within this dissertation; in particular, it has been offered after Negri's 'value-affect' as a force for re-diversification, since the gulf which accrues between act, object, or individual and the ideological system it is accorded value in creates space for a form of ambivalent liberalisation; a restoration of *affect* as a possible (problematic) arbiter of value. In Chapter Four, this is extended to the realm of cultural symbolism, where its incommensurability with any coherently pastoral position is emphasised; for now, it offers a contextual framework for the figure of the faked orgasm advocated above. As has been the case at several points in this project so far, Jagose's 'counterfeit pleasure' may be seen as a demotic re-articulation of other critical positions on semantic veracity and our phenomenological encounters with signs: fake orgasm is a supplement which both registers and/or replaces its signified, and as such the hasty proliferation of signs for 'Ireland' is comparable to it, as is the volatility of the objectal trigger which may mean one thing or another, but which always – in either case – represents the material *absence* of this signified and subsequent, detrital, materiality of the sign in McGahern (the ubiquitous oilcloth shopping bag; barefoot Susan, or, as above, the sodomitical scene inscribed spectrally in both *The Dark* and *Amongst Women*). Sexualising the supplement is hardly at odds, as a gesture, with either meteorological eroticism or with the economy of compositional or postural hexis on display in those examples from McGahern discussed above. If orgasm seems an incongruous point to introduce here, it is only because we are accustomed to reading it as a terminus and not, as I would reframe it (as *faked*) here, as something which '[bodies] forth, within the logic of narrative, the dissolution of that very logic', not, this time, with *pleasure*, but with a declaration of ideological *complicity* that undoes the authority of ideology – with, in other words, a *sinthome*.

The faked orgasm is also a strategic essentialism, 'impersonal in a number of related ways where impersonality might be calculated as something nonspecific to the individual, as something shared among strangers, or as something of the self that exceeds the self.'⁶³ Its provenance is, of course, peculiarly feminine, in a way which reflects the mendacity or lability of a certain image of the 'green wound', of Lloyd's 'Irish mouth', as duplicitous or uncanny; at the same time, it forecloses on its own revision as *heroic*, since its perceived purpose is to communicate patriarchal enmeshment. We might look at the faked orgasm as a declaration of contingency or political victimhood which, within mainstream feminist discourse at least, really does register shame and abnegation, rather than the spurious pride-in-abnegation implied by an eternally immanent and virtuous subalternity. Nobody wants to 'own' the fake orgasm, and even Spivak's spirited defence of it hinges on a victory – the revelation of hetero-visual dominance as illusory – which, as Jagose implies, is not much a victory, since fake orgasm is a tautology simultaneously recognising patriarchy as it lampoons or undercuts it: it is both complicit and incommensurable, both slavish and manipulative, both symptomatic and sintho-matic. Josephine, the resident orgasmist and fantasist of *The Pornographer*, is suspected by a great many critics of being phoney or otherwise suspect; within the text itself, her attempt to ensure a respectable marriage through pregnancy is cast as a battle of wits. Significantly, though, both protagonists in this battle construct themselves as passive; 'I never told her that I loved her or promised her anything'⁶⁴, the narrator insists, and, when accosted in London by Josephine's protector – the vaguely stage-Irish Kavanagh – this passivity takes on a pessimistically philosophical tone, in a way which both spectrally politicises this instance and echoes the essence of the fake orgasm:

I had just let the door swing when Kavanagh caught me and pulled me against the wall, "Are you coming or not?"

"No," I pushed against his arms but it was like pushing against trees.

“Are you coming or not?” and he started to shake me. I had no fear, feeling apologetic in the face of my own coldness, having the bad taste to remember a Civil War joke, “Who’re you for?” the man with the gun was asking the drunk outside the pub: “I’m for yous.”⁶⁵

I’m for yous is a *sinthome* in itself, in that it declares itself as ideologically enmeshed even as it makes of this enmeshment a categorically ‘idiotic’, fatalistic, comedy; to say that this liberates us from ideology would, however, be a step too far, since it would mean wishfully crediting a wisecrack with the capacity to shatter a superstructure (comedy is just as adept at *supporting* superstructures), and its role in this scene is, one might argue, conducive to what Lori Rogers accounts for as a narrative of ‘canny man resisting evil woman until right woman comes along’.⁶⁶ We might place this ‘Civil War’ joke, however, in the context of Shaun O’Connell’s reading of Josephine as a figure for ‘Ireland-as-woman’, albeit less a goddess with ‘moist valleys’ than a ‘grasping’ and pathologically conservative one.⁶⁷ The performance of strategic indifference (conspicuous, of course, for its paradoxical reconfirmation of dependence) suggested by ‘I’m for yous’ and pitted, in this instance, against a woman scapegoated for the crimes against masculine liberty committed by a ‘grasping’ Ireland, begins, via this reading, to suggest a particular work of visual art.

This is Michael Farrell’s *Madonna Irlanda, or, the First Real Irish Political Painting* (1974) [fig. 4], a pop-art reimagining of Francois Boucher’s *Blonde Odalisque* (1752), the model for which is the Franco-Irish courtesan Louisa O’Murphy – known to a fond canon as ‘Boucher’s girl on the couch’. Farrell’s work anticipates Mieke Bal’s argument for the ‘quoting’ of great masters as a means of galvanising present interfaces with visual art; specifically, in this case, interfaces philosophical and voluptuary with O’Murphy’s buttocks.⁶⁸ This feature is the conspicuous centrepiece of both paintings, which depict a prostrate nude on an ‘oriental’ couch; whilst Boucher’s nude is a rococo confection *par excellence*, Farrell’s ‘quote’ revises her, as Cheryl Herr

explains, as ‘cut free from the rococo world of pleasant motion and hooked into a profound stasis produced from ambivalence about the female body’ and Irish masculinity.⁶⁹ A portrait of the artist, leaning into the top right corner of the image and smoking while staring morosely at the odalisque, is compared, by Herr, to the po-faced provo/voyeur who contends with the motherland as an indifferent entity viewed covetously from the guerrilla’s hiding spot – a dynamic, of course, played out in *Amongst Women*, where Eddie McNiff’s cold gun might well be the cause of *Madonna Irlanda*’s reddened buttocks cheeks. Farrell intends his odalisque as a degraded Hibernia and has explained his decision to depict her in this way ‘because she is a whore’; critics have followed this lead and interpreted the painting as a political statement detached from the fleshy potential of an actual female body, such that, for example, Dorothy Walker can read O’Murphy painting by Farrell, this time depicting its model as butchered (‘bouchered’) into ‘cuts’, as suggesting partition or paramilitary kneecapping, but not sexual violence. The disappearing of Louisa O’Murphy echoes the disappearing of Moran’s daughters in critical analyses which treat female bodies as host matter upon which, in the case of *Madonna Irlanda*, meaning is inscribed: for Farrell, political disillusionment is expressed through an image of displaced sexual ownership, just as, in the glimpsed image of Eddie McNiff, masculine potency is registered in the gun-barrel that marks a ‘bare arse’. In both cases, however, a queer state of stalemate also ensues; neither scene shows Irish masculinity realised triumphantly, but delimits it as an aspiration to violence as brutal as it is fantastical.

There is something both comic and sinister in Paul Frankl’s well-known description of *Blonde Odalisque* as a work that ‘can be smilingly enjoyed as one enjoys a rosebud which needs no interpretation.’⁷⁰ Recast as *Irlanda*, a supine version of Hibernia, the odalisque brings a number of provocative connotations to bear on nationalism, on notions of ownership and object-fetish, and voyeurism. What chiefly interests me is *Madonna Irlanda*’s presentation of a subject-object tension – putatively predatory male and putatively available female – held in abeyance, and according, as a

result, with textbook Freudian definitions of sexual perversion. *Blonde Odalisque* is not the first baroque painting, nor even the first painting by Boucher, to foreground the female buttocks as an object of erotic interest or possible substitute for the vulva. Diego Velazquez's *The Toilet of Venus* (1647-51) appears to actually play on the interchangeability of orifices by presenting the model's body from the back and including a mirror that is tilted towards her genitals, but instead reflects her face. The painting is housed in London's National Gallery and was vandalised by a suffragist in 1914; it also comes in for opprobrium from John Berger, who reads the mirrored Venus as complicit in her own objectification and thus open to scapegoating as a primary instance of scopophilia. Edward Snow dissents from this, identifying a 'revisionary aspect' to *The Toilet of Venus* and arguing for a comparison with the confrontational tactics of Manet's *Olympia*, as well as increased sensitivity to the suggestions of doubling, distance, and disfigurement triggered by the motif of the mirror.⁷¹ No academic commentary appears to exist, however, on the 'Rokeby Venus' as an example of *vagina dentata*, effectively supplanting the vulva, not with a fig leaf, but with a face: such a consideration would both subtend Snow's argument and incorporate Norman Bryson's separate verdict on Velazquez as a smuggler of iconographic 'contraband', via the subtle distending of effects, in court paintings.⁷² It is, in other words, not wholly anomalous to suggest that the erotogenic fleshiness of *The Toilet of Venus*, or of any other fleshy buttocks in Western art, serves not only to straddle the boundary between pornography and the aesthetic but also to negate or neutralise longstanding psychological discomfort with anatomical agency in the love-object. Such negation makes possible and visible a conversion of flesh to *tabula* or screen; to a field for what Calvin Thomas, after Scott McDonald, calls 'aggressive acceptance' – 'In her [erotic] performance she positions her body as a reassuring surface for the male's ejaculatory inscription [...] and so reaffirms the male [...] in the position of power and value from which she herself is excluded'.⁷³

How, if at all, does this impact on the sodomitical scenes I have sketched above? The short answer is that it disrupts narrative progress with a vision of detrital staticity and especially sinister non-address; the longer answer, with which I will finish here, emphasises the ways in which this disruption quotes or cites the adjacent scenarios and phenomena I have marshalled here – the official legacy of biopolitical violence, the codes means of accounting and atoning for this in certain kinds of official culture, the peculiar form and *dénouement* of the opening scene of *The Dark*, the gendered strategies of relation and dominance on display in *Amongst Women*, and the pictorial articulation of many of these anxieties in pseudo-sodomitical scenes which instrumentalise a passive figure to inscribe mastery – and thus gains a broader, if obscure, political purchase. Madonna-as-Ireland, Ireland-as-whore, is also a child who has been beaten: Louisa O’Murphy was reputedly just fourteen when it was produced, and her buttock cheeks are reddened from, presumably, having been ‘beaten’ or spanked. At the same time, Farrell’s Madonna is not the fleshy confection of Boucher’s ‘rosebud’ (a word which Frankl doesn’t intend as a *sinthome*, but which is all-too-easily queered into a sublimated reference to the anus if O’Murphy’s ample buttocks, redoubled throughout several works by Boucher for which O’Murphy appears to supply a model for male *and* female figures, is aligned with it): her cadaverous complexion and motionlessness is interpreted, by Herr, as a ‘pictorial’ exploitation of Boucher’s frequent use of a ‘swimming’ pose. ‘Held in place by halo on the left and burning buttocks on the right, slowly turning from living flesh (Boucher was famous for his flesh tones, his rosy knees and buttocks) to statuary marble’, this Madonna/odalisque is a figure for sexual failure and censorship.⁷⁴ In a way acutely, if creatively, analogous to the non-beating of *The Dark*, the non-rape of *Amongst Women*, and the non-erotic encounter of ‘The Use of Reason’, her refused return and serenely vacant expression render grotesque the association between interiority and instrumentalism I have signalled above. What I mean to imply by this is that the mechanics of composition at work in my examples of legible sexual hexis and violent inscription here undergo a symbolic declension, a detrital devolution into non-meaning, non-identity, and

even kitsch (in the case of the girl on the couch) which ‘goes nowhere’, stays a moment of decomposition, and is revealed in the dilated or sustained encounter engendered between the ontological autonomy of the image and the contemplative disposition of the observer. We might consider such uncomfortable ‘looking’, a gaze which cannot access translucence, which must remain open to the limits of enigmatic signification, as an *ethical orientation*. This is the grounds upon which the opening scene of *The Dark* continues to offer something to ongoing anxieties about biopolitical injustice, structural violence, and socio-political myopia in the post-nationalist, post-religious, state: not because it *explains* anything, but precisely because it *reflects*, and refuses, to the end, to provide a coherent or satisfying resolution (to ‘come’). The last passage contains a somewhat supplementary or metaphorical non-orgasm in itself, as father-and-son engage in a false or adequated recollection of their time together, locked into an inevitably synthetic performance of their respective roles: ‘It seemed that the whole world must turn over in the night and howl in its boredom, for the father and for the son and for the whole shoot, but it did not.’⁷⁵

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), p. 53.

² Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane, ‘Matt Calderwood (b. 1975)’, <http://emuseum.pointblank.ie/online_catalogue/work-detail.php?objectid=2156> 3rd January 2015.

³ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 48.

⁴ Michael Gale, in interview with Brian Fallon, *Michael Gale*, ed. John O’Regan (Cork: Gandon, 1995), p.8.

⁵ John McGahern, *Memoir* (Faber and Faber: London, 2005), p. 188.

⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 66.

⁷ Quoted in Dennis Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. xi.

⁸ McGahern, ‘God and Me’, *Love of the World*, pp. 149-151 [p. 149].

⁹ Quoted in Michael Fried, *Manet’s Modernism or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 186-187.

¹⁰ ‘God and Me’, p. 149.

¹¹ Lee Edelman, ‘The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive’, *Narrative* 6.1 (January 1998), pp. 18-30 [pp. 19, 22, 28].

¹² John McGahern, *Memoir* (Faber and Faber: London, 2005), p. 52.

- ¹³ McGahern, 'The Church and Its Spire', *Love of the World: Collected Essays*, ed. Stanley Van der Ziel (Faber and Faber: London, 2009), pp. 133-148 [p. 146].
- ¹⁴ Dennis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* [Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1993], p. 62.
- ¹⁵ Val Nolan, 'If it was just th'oul book...': A History of the McGahern Banning Controversy', *Irish Studies Review* 19.3 (2011), pp. 261-279 [p. 261].
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Dermot Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile, 2009), p. 402.
- ¹⁷ Peter Guy, 'Reading John McGahern in Light of the Murphy Report', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 99.393 (Spring, 2010), pp. 91-101 [p. 91].
- ¹⁸ Creative-Negri, 'Winning entry: Journey Into Light', <<http://www.studioneagri.ie/index.php/2012/06/winning-entry-journey-of-light/>> accessed 15th December 2013.
- ¹⁹ Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organisational Culture* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2012), p. 175.
- ²⁰ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: University of California Press, 1998).
- ²¹ Lisa Smyth, *Abortion and Nation: The Politics of Reproduction in Contemporary Ireland* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 33.
- ²² Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, 'Love Me, Love My Ombre, Elle', *Diacritics* 14.4 (Winter, 1984), pp. 19-36 [p. 22].
- ²³ Annamarie Jagose, *Orgasmology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 178.
- ²⁴ McGahern, *The Pornographer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 113.
- ²⁵ Colm Toibín, 'The Use of Reason', *Mothers and Sons* (New York: Scribner, 2007), pp. 1-40 [p. 18].
- ²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Routledge: New York, 2010), p. xxi.
- ²⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 27.
- ²⁸ Ibid, pp. 27-28.
- ²⁹ Ibid, p. 35.
- ³⁰ Roland Barthes, *Sade-Fourier-Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p.28.
- ³¹ John McGahern, 'The Recruiting Officer', *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 100-111 [p. 103].
- ³² Foucault's well-known account of Greek homosexuality in *The Uses of Pleasure* includes the precise caveat that a shame remained attendant upon the receptive, penetrated, partner, owing to the proximity of this position and the anatomical predisposition of women.
- ³³ Graham L. Hammill, *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Bacon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 25.
- ³⁴ *The Order of Things*, p. 6.
- ³⁵ Jane Bennet, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2001), p. 3.
- ³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Part 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 60.
- ³⁷ McGahern, *The Dark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 7-9.
- ³⁸ Toolin, p. 41.
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- ⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (Verso: New York, 1991), p. xiii.
- ⁴¹ Ibid, p. 7.
- ⁴² Sigmund Freud, 'A Child is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversion', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 17, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 1999).
- ⁴³ See Kent L. Brintnall, *Ecco Homo: The Male-Body-in-Pain as Redemptive Figure* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2011), pp. 68-89.
- ⁴⁴ Žižek, 'Shostakovich in Casablanca', *Lacan.com*, 13th January 2015.
- ⁴⁵ *The Dark*, p. 191.
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- ⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 430.
- ⁴⁸ Bersani, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass., 1993), p. 4.
- ⁴⁹ John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (Faber and Faber: London, 1991), p. 5.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 88.
- ⁵¹ Stanley Van der Ziel, 'Fionn and Oisín in the Land of Wink and Nod: Heroes, History, and the Creative Imagination in John McGahern's "Amongst Women"', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 31.2 (Fall, 2005), pp. 10-18 [p. 13].

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- ⁵³ *Amongst Women*, p. 5.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 178.
- ⁵⁵ Brintnall (glossing Lacan and Kaja Silverman), p.67.
- ⁵⁶ *Amongst Women*, p. 183.
- ⁵⁷ See Robert F. Garratt, 'John McGahern's *Amongst Women*: Representation, Memory, and Trauma', *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005), pp. 121-135.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 15.
- ⁵⁹ McGahern, *Memoir* (Faber and Faber: London, 2005), p. 271.
- ⁶⁰ Stanley Van der Ziel, 'Fionn and Oisín in the Land of Wink and Nod: Heroes, History, and the Creative Imagination in John McGahern's "Amongst Women"', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 31.2 (Fall, 2005), pp. 10-18 [p. 10].
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- ⁶² *Amongst Women*, p. 19.
- ⁶³ Jagose, p. 197.
- ⁶⁴ McGahern, *The Pornographer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 112.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 228.
- ⁶⁶ Lori Rogers, *Feminine Nation: Performance, Gender, and Resistance in the Works of John McGahern and Neil Jordan* (Boston: University Press of America, 1984), p. 74.
- ⁶⁷ Shaun O'Connell, 'Door into the Light: John McGahern's Ireland', *The Massachusetts Review* 25.2 (Summer, 1984), pp. 255-268 [pp. 265, 266].
- ⁶⁸ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- ⁶⁹ Cheryl Herr, 'The Erotics of Irishness', *Critical Enquiry* Vol. 17.1 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 1-34 [p. 13].
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- ⁷³ Calvin Thomas, *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety, and the Male Body on the Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 15.
- ⁷⁴ Herr, p. 13.
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Fascinating Francis:

A Preposterous History

Introduction

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,
What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,
What calculation, number, measurement replied?¹

To put this question another way, what force of dreadful latency autonomously sustains the occult ethnocentrism of what W.B. Yeats calls ‘we Irish’ – a force imagined, in ‘The Statues’, as a kind of *Weltgeist* manifest in ‘the lineaments of a plummet-measured face’; the physiognomy of a cosmic aristocracy invoked as national ancestors? To ‘choose your ancestors’ means, for Robert Pogue Harrison, to engage in ‘lexification’, a form of ‘temporal and historical schematizing [which] enables human directedness in the verbal, institutional, and cognitive domains through its synthesis of the law of legacy.’² Certainly this is at work in Yeats, especially in *A Vision*, but we might also consider it a form of mortal obligation: the barefoot Susan McGahern, divided between two anecdotes and distanced by dis-identification and, as such, by re-diversification, an ‘eikon’ of significant but recalcitrant inheritance, thus complexly intersects with it. In the Rising, symbolic dissent converts to literal violence, creating martyrs who achieve consubstantiality with the nation and potentially transcend the distancing effects of metaphor. Patrick Pearse’s graveside oration for the Fenian O’Donovan Rossa, delivered one year before the Rising, makes much of the generative power of life to ‘spring from’ death, and ends with the famous ejaculation, ‘the

fools, the fools, the fools! - They have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace'.³ These graves, 'holding' their dead like encrypted convictions, preserve a dissident residue that will rise again, and which is deferred to some future point of coherence. Lloyd's reading of nationalist kitsch as an unlikely repository of thwarted futurity uneasily blends the symbolism of affective or suggestive affinity (community) with latent or encrypted violence (insurrection): acts of coherent militancy which conclude what affect begins, and which occur in the most intimate sense on and in the body.

Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*, a postmodern novel of the Rising processed through the lens of an immanent queer citizen-subjectivity, captures this aspect of Pearse's posthumous myth when Jim, the young protagonist, observes the 'soldier-speaker' Pearse orating again at the grave of Wolfe Tone. He feels that '[Pearse] was saying things out of history books, but still he made it sound as if was his friend he was talking of [...] That must be hard, Jim thought, to be talking at the graveside of your friend'.⁴ The love triangle of *At Swim, Two Boys*, which is also figured as the development and delineation of political subject-positions which are at once Irish, socialist, and queer, moves towards an affective articulation of affinity modelled first in this instance of Pearsian homoeroticism – a sense of which reaches Jim in the form of ambient and unasked for galvanic encounter: 'wind in the grass' and 'whirring rain', giving way to the sound of a distant flute, as the soldier-speaker explains that 'Such is the destiny of heroes [...] to follow the far, faint call that leads to battle or to the gallows tree.' O'Neill's soldier-speaker revises Pearse as the 'third way' into national affinity imagined in *At Swim, Two Boys* – that is, neither public men and cheering crowds nor the pathological desire for self-destruction and personal glory often attributed to Pearse, but a queer conception of affect as excess beyond the exigencies of normative nation-formation: *affection*. Antonio Negri identifies affect as that force which undergirds and powers all relations – a version of *labour-power* – but remains beyond measure and representation within capitalism, retaining, as it were, a degree of agency, or a capacity to foment

affinity and sociality beyond the remit of power structures. Patrick R. Mullen has recently deployed this theory of what Brian Massumi elsewhere calls the ‘autonomy of affect’ to rethink a queer conception of Irish labour and dissidence, extending from Wilde to O’Neill via figures like Joyce and Synge, and dealing with the volatile matter of affect as it inaugurates instances of affinity that are not calibrated by power structures, but occur in their interstices; not expressed as narrative, but implied or made immanent, according better with the epistemology of the closet than with the pedagogy of citizenship.

Via O’Neill’s reimagining, which is not a ‘secret history’ but a revised and aestheticised history, the figure of Pearse fits loosely into this alternative canon of affect. Power structures, and the ideological hierarchies of nation-formation, seek to control and direct affect through pedagogy, the logic of which is accumulative. This is, however, ultimately limited, since affect itself is extemporal, and not *linear* but *lateral*. Thus, Jim’s response to a speech by Pearse which partakes of that Pearsian rhetoric read, afterwards, as pyric in its commitment to violence – as the denuded, concentrated, or truncated militancy of the ‘essential terrorist’ – is one of love, his national identity constructed in tandem with his queer identity. Another character, McMurrough, is interrogated as to his position in relation to both of these identities, and his response registers the movement towards self-realisation as an organic event of affect at the heart of O’Neill’s novel: ‘I believe that I exist’. Realistically, Pearse fit into this with difficulty, in the first because he is not a minor figure to be reclaimed for a minor slant on history and, in the second, because his posthumous image as a political martyr has already been exploded and deflated, not least through interpretation by some as a personal suicide mission. Mullen, incidentally, reads the suicide which takes place in Wilde’s ‘The Portrait of Mr W.H.’ as an actual model for the proliferation of queer affinity which might be considered a model for national sacrifice: two suicides undertaken to ‘prove’ a theory which is at best unprovable and, at worst, false.⁵ This potentially has some traction with Pearse, not least because it registers the sense of pointlessness and irresponsibility

projected onto Pearse's sacrificial vision in, for instance, Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, which features in its script and stage instructions a 'portrait in the window', based on Pearse and only apprehended as an outline or a shadow. This figure orates a bastardised Pearsian speech and rouses a rabble of fatally idealistic tenement dwellers. As early pitting of the domestic and consolatory against the pyrrhic public spirit of nationalist dupes, O'Casey's critique of Pearse registers something of a post-Independence trend towards institutionalising compromise as it is expressed through aesthetic austerity: idealism, in this shadow-Pearse, converts to the alienated affectivity of what Cheryl Herr has called 'the puritanical commitment of a Provo-guerrilla', provisional especially in his uncompromising, perhaps inhuman, attachment not to community, but to an abstract idea.⁶ This reading would be odds with Mullen's position, which reads the suicides in Wilde's story as acts of affective, lateral, or extemporal passion – not as strategies for the subtending of official history. The portrait in the window is, like a Magritte fantasy, both part of the window and part of the hypothetical zone of space beyond the cramped bracket of the Abbey stage, a space which, like all extra-theatrical spaces, relates to the drama as a kind of contingent inevitability. In Magritte, subtle alterations to the natural world enjoin an uncanny pareidolia that is also banal: for the first audiences of *The Plough and the Stars*, recognising the shade of Patrick Pearse enacting, in outline or cameo form, the embodied gestures which accompany oration and 'remember' Pearse as reduced to a script and a spectre, the experience of communal recognition through affect – recognition of something not made explicit, that this both Pearse and not-Pearse – loosely echoes pareidolia and provides an example of another kind of event of recognition.

On several levels, this is inseparable from the ubiquitous heroic profile of Pearse, an image which goes on to become a mass-produced cultural object, and which, like the shadow on O'Casey's stage, like the cameo outline inaugurating an instant of recognition as it adheres to a screen – a frame, an apparatus of capture or a horizon of meaning – and like the photograph

itself, which, as Barthes explains, ‘belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not, Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive’, is apprehended as a *Gestalt* outline or figural cipher.⁷ There are many photographs of Pearse in profile, and many more reproductions made, for memorabilia or in tribute, which repeatedly picture Pearse in a sideways pose. So synonymous is this image with the popular perception of Pearse as either a visionary martyr or an affected child-man – and, moreover, with Pearse as a symbolic seal or boss on a popular history enthralled to the spectacle of the late colonial native as guerrilla – that it is possible to speculate, now, how much our image of Pearse the character emanates through some combination of affective encounter and pedagogical adequation from this photograph of Pearse in profile.

It may not be so heavy-handed to read this deeply into a chosen pose, and in spite of the aloof but essentially nonviolent aura the image gives off, Pearse’s enmeshment in the discourse of militant nationalism makes of this determined decantation of light and shadow, this particular pose which compliments what Barthes considered the arrested momentum of the photograph’s *noeme*, a piece of formidable cultural iconography that seems, above all, to be excessively *fixed*, excessively closed, and excessively mysterious: a supplementary – in the sense of that which replaces and also that which duplicates or counterfeits – death-mask. ‘The stock signifier of the inscrutable available to realist portraiture’ in the nineteenth century, Enda Duffy points out, was the profile pose, and the fact that Pearse conventionally posed in this way to conceal a slightly disfiguring squint in his right eye provides one example of what Barthes would call a ‘punctum’, the prick of personal, affective acuity which allows the subject to interpret a photograph athwart its narrative message.⁸ The punctum Barthes sights in his mother’s photographs, ‘she will die’, is also true of this photo of Pearse, and the various details of Pearse’s queerly-drawn character perhaps supply several more punctums. The fact of the squint, unseen in profile photos but

disseminated as a piece of knowledge, means that a possible punctum of this picture is vulnerability: the human interest story of Pearse's shyness and effeminacy, traits concealed by the aesthetic austerity or informational minimalism of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call 'facialisation': a white hole/black screen system that is the primary base or mount of all signification, all symbolism – 'A broad face with white cheeks, a chalk face with eyes cut in for a black hole. Clown head, white clown, moon-white mime, angel of death, Holy Shroud.' This is a machine, not for the generation of signs, but for the hosting of signs, for the sheer material fact of signs to begin with: like the wound of castration, the *black hole* – the grapheme, the 'tremulous wounds' of Greta Garbo's eyes in Barthes's *Mythologies*, which allow an archetypal face to emerge from a white screen pitted with meaningful shadows, a face in a curtain, or the eye sockets of Patrick Pearse – is one of two redundancies, the second of which is the white screen, which together create the 'abstract machine' of faciality.⁹

Duffy's reading of 'native spectacle' in Yeats's 'Municipal Gallery Revisited' attends to the alternating use of frontal poses and profile poses in the paintings Yeats makes use of to construct an ekphrastic sense of native visual culture, a native scene, a collection of headshots enjoining the coherence of cameos and allowing Yeats to locate himself in the context of a generation. Those paintings whose subjects Yeats names are posed frontally; those who are categorized according to sometimes violent or overdetermined public identities – such as Sean Keating's posse of guerrilla soldiers, whose deflected faces actively echo the cultivated otherness of Pearse's profile pose – are shown from the side. Yeats, Duffy argues, accounts for these profiles, this refusal of frontal engagement, an evasion of what Levinas would call the 'face-to-face' relation of ethical affinity, 'terrible': terrible, that is, as the 'beauty' of martial sacrifice and of the 'plummet-measured' eugenics which drift, ideologically speaking, towards the logic of fascism: hard lines which activate national 'memories', drawing on the atavistic certitudes of physiognomy. It is precisely between fascism and queer relation that I wish to locate this photograph, which, like most

evocations of facialisation put to the task of communicating a political absolute decanted into the cult of personality, is undermined or *textured* by those extramural ‘punctums’ existing at the dark side of the ‘moon’-face: in the implied space Pearse always seems to be looking into, a glorious future, or a contextual vacuum, since his image is cropped and projected onto cultural artefacts which retain their thingly quality and become kitsch – objects of degraded or declined value which, to return to Mullen’s dissident affect once again, give rise to more immanent, unrealised, or non-narrativised forms of engagement. The artist Rita Duffy’s ‘Patrick Pearse Pasta Sauce’, for instance, is less a kitsch artefact than a work of art incorporating the worst excesses of the kitsch – that which declares that ‘you have wasted your life’: a force lurking in art and waiting to disrupt the intimacy of libidinal investment by judging these emotions to be inauthentic or moot.

Is it possible to outrun this inevitability? Do we wish to? Power structures, as Negri emphasises, create conditions in which affect is fomented, but cannot exert full control over affective reactions, connections, and modulations: in other words, if the narrative of Pearse’s profile as it is bossed upon official history is, as it were, ‘black-and-white’, and thus subject to an ideological aging process, can the *punctum* preserve it, restoring its strangeness and clearing the ground for the generation of new associations? ‘Patrick Pearse Pasta Sauce’ references the mass reproduction of Pearse’s image, its ossification into an object or product, which followed especially from the 1966 commemorations of the Rising, the point at which the originary violence of the current disposition seemed, perhaps, more proximate, and required intense recodification to ensure that images such as Pearse’s profile pose do not threaten the stability of the Irish state as an emotional or conceptual entity. As such, kitsch possibly suggests not the return of the repressed, but the return of the marginal or the affective; subjective, suggestive, lateral, or embodied modes of identification which never actually go away, which can be reconsidered – even if, at first, it is only to laugh at them.

4.1 *Eikon*

In a mood not dissimilar, perhaps, to ‘Patrick Pearse Pasta Sauce’, I have intended the title of this third chapter to suggest Susan Sontag’s ‘Fascinating Fascism’; not to imply that Francis McGahern, the writer’s father, was a fascist – which of course he was not – but rather to plant this fortuitously alliterative association in the mind of the reader and use it to launch an affective or preposterous history of Francis-as-*eikon*. Dermot McCarthy uses this word to describe the effigy or image of Susan reconstructed throughout McGahern’s work, arguing that ‘what [the writer’s] *poiēsis* strives to ‘restore’ is the presence of the mother *in* her image in this world: ‘the lost image’ and the ‘lost world’ are the mother and mother-world’, and drawing indirect attention to its solidity and staticity, which I have theorised, in Chapter Two, as a form of metastatic representation or consumption – as a form of iconographic stillness which both offers to ‘restore’ a lost world and places a painful limit on this.¹⁰ I have stressed this as a limit of identification and suggested that a degree of conceptual estrangement or dis-identification, born of affective response, offers a way into an ethical orientation towards alterity, or an awareness of the latent, extensible, self-alterity Martin Heidegger loosely denotes as *conscience*. My reading of Francis here is both similar and different. In the first, it is harder to have sympathy for Francis; in the second, his *eikon* is historicised, or historically implicated, in a more pronounced way. The first caveat here is not a significant one – we need not have sympathy for Susan either, the point is to *dis-identify*, to acknowledge otherness, rather than colonise with interpretation – and the second is what explains the short preface about Pearse’s profile pose, a study which should, before progressing further, be placed in the broader context of this project.

To begin with, we might return to Stephen’s vampire poem, which has, at least tangentially, a pre-established, ambient, heritage and a parallel political life. 1816, the so-called

‘year without a summer’, saw persistent rain and low temperatures give rise to the last major subsistence crisis in continental Europe, and, at Lake Geneva, to John Polidori’s *The Vampyre*; the Irish writer Bram Stoker’s better-known *Dracula*, of course, follows in turn from the former, and Jonathan Bate also contends that Lord Byron’s ‘Darkness’ responds to these particular conditions, which have been attributed to volcanic eruption and are, therefore, events of ‘major weather’: a combination of atmospheric oppressiveness, economic collapse, and civil violence fomenting, in ‘Darkness’ at least, a kind of proto-ecological consciousness. Weather, a ‘synecdoche for the environment’, thus links discrete and distant parts of the planet via the motile capacities of miasma, a concept whose modern associative implications (pollution, ‘brown cloud’ disaster, nuclear contamination) effect a curious subtending of the role played, within the horizon of imperialism, by colonial disease. The work of contagion in *Dracula* has been given an Irish analysis by Joseph Valente, but another event which has come to occupy a ‘major’ position in the imaginary of nationalism – an event, on a global scale, of ‘minor weather’ – stands in proximity to this; the miasmatic passage of blight from Europe, and from field to field, which engendered the Famine of 1844-1849. Where Bate reads ‘Darkness’ as unwittingly anticipating the threat of nuclear winter, Stuart McLean has prefaced his study of the Famine with an excerpt from James Clarence Mangan’s ‘The Coming Event’ (1844), which, with its call to ‘Spend strength, sinew, soul, on your toil to atone/For past idleness and errors;/So best shall ye bear to encounter alone/The Event and its terrors’, seems an uncanny anticipation of precisely this disaster, and particularly of the various ways in which the event was framed as a punishment.¹¹

The Famine, too, sees a triangulation of administrative chaos, human disaster, and ecological eruption registered, at the level of culture, as beyond the usual remit of representation and quantification: instead, perhaps, of the hubris of Frankenstein, whose monster wanders and murders in search of acceptance within the horizon of humanism, the Great Famine may be perceived as an early catastrophe of the free hand of capitalism, taking economic autonomy to its

most callous conclusion. 'Towards the end of the century, when 'Irish constitutional politics merges which political insurgency in a form of racial paranoia that constitutes violence itself as a product of the Irish national character', one of its morphisms in the British press is the 'Irish Vampire', a figure for atavistic parasitism recalling, among other things, earlier versions of Irish contagion – congenital inferiority, excessive and marauding population levels, miasmatic slum disease.¹² Dracula's 'coffin ship' may or may not remember this, or may, like 'Darkness' and 'The Coming Event', be appropriated as inhabiting an ether filled with images chemically linking different concepts to one another as these undergo a discursive exfoliation over time. This, in effect, is how I am defining *preposterous history* here. Miasma, an environmental event which makes use of the meteorological to diffuse 'quasi-objects' – substances neither solid nor wholly non-solid, enjoining a degree of compositional resilience and persistence that can be pernicious – may be placed under the category of *dark ecology*, and quasi-objects, which are associated most of all with science and industry, pose ethical questions similar to those posed by *Frankenstein*. 'The task becomes to love the disgusting, inert, and meaningless [...] The most ethical act is to love the other precisely in their artificiality, rather than seeking to prove their naturalness and authenticity', what Maurice Blanchot called the 'third relation' and which, in Chapter One, has been examined as it is chemically suspended in the kitsch.¹³

It was raining too at Duras, County Clare, in August 1897, when, over the course of 'that wet afternoon' during which Augusta Gregory, W.B. Yeats, and Edward Martyn hammered out a plan for their 'Celtic Theatre', another motley coterie conspired to make a literary intervention.¹⁴ The idea that rain prevented the group from going outside, encouraging a conversational turn towards theatre, is still more grist to the mythical mill which establishes Gregory, Yeats, and ultimately J.M. Synge as the principal instigators of both the Abbey project and the cultural revival, as Yeats's 'Municipal Gallery Revisited' suggests:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
We three alone in modern times had brought
Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.

Soil is, of course, implicated in atmospheric exceptionalism, functioning, at times, as an especially eugenicist metaphor; here, the noble and the beggar-man are equally ‘terrible and gay’ in their embodiment of an uncompromising Irishness whose history is traced, as in ‘The Statues’, in the ‘lineaments’ of individual faces. Duffy, who reads this poem as documenting Yeats’s search for ‘new version of postcolonial subjectivity’, aligns the poet’s alternate preservation of anonymity (‘An ambush; pilgrims at the waterside’, ‘An Abbot or Archbishop’, glimpsed) and willingness to name subjects (Arthur Griffith, Kevin O’Higgins, Gregory and Synge) with the respective paintings’ treatments of figure and pose. Where ‘the frightening otherness of insurgency’ is implied by ‘the spectacle of the native’, gazes are deflected or diverted, as in the ‘heroic profile’ of most photographs of Pearse; by contrast, where head-on engagement is depicted in an image, figures are named, and expressions described, variously, as ‘Beautiful and gentle’, ‘ebullient’, and ‘grave [and] deep’.¹⁵ Both effects are combined in the troublesome figure of Roger Casement, who stares out from the canvas to address the observer, but is also obscured by the bars of the courtroom in which he is depicted – ‘Guarded’ by both carceral architecture and a suggestion of otherness manifest in interiority. Like Pearse, Casement comes, latterly, to connote both insurgency and sexual dissidence, and while Pearse’s self-consciousness about an ocular squint apparently results in the ubiquity of his heroic profile, Casement’s head-on gaze is, arguably, more problematic, since it invites a sense of challenge and affinity which is interrupted or

delayed, rather than negated, by both the bars and the considerable degree of perspectival distance John Lavery places between him and the viewer. ‘Heart-smitten with emotion’, Yeats covers his own eyes, averting his own gaze: faced with a pictorial survey of recent, violent, gestures of state-formation, he chooses to look towards the future prospect of (posthumous) coherence in the form of an epitaph, ‘my glory was I had such friends’. The averted gaze, especially as it appears in heroic profile form, models a similarly futurological gesture or impetus, ‘looking forward’ to the moment at which its role in a stable pantheon of meaningful events will be assured by retrospection. The frontispiece to the first edition of Gregory’s *Our Irish Theatre* shows its author in profile, part-aristocrat, part-visionary, and drawing on the pose itself as a ‘stock signifier of the inscrutable’; at the disappointing (for intellectuals as much as irregulars) advent of the Free State, such founding gestures – whatever, if any, their tangible results – becoming important, even self-sufficient, cameo poses; hence Yeats’s speculation on whether or not *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* sent certain men out to be shot, or Sean O’Casey’s indictment of Pearse in *The Plough and the Stars*. Such models for cultivated otherness enjoin a degree of cultural coalescence usually associated with the declining of national icons into kitsch: reverting, that is, to matter without meaning, or to matter as *sinthome*.

Francis arrives on this scene as an inheritor to the iconographic grammar of native spectacle. Within this discourse, both the metaphysically dispersed or ambient matter of, variously, national spirit, de-verbalised keens, sacred weather, miasma, bat sails, spectres, indigenous sublimity, symbolic traces, and meteorological eroticism enjoin a collective metaphorical charge which underwrites national affinity with an apparent ontological autonomy, a degree of tactility, or of *pleasure*, only to leave us with quasi-substances afterwards. Cultivated otherness, which Duffy conceives of as paradoxically grafted onto an earlier pictorial or representative tradition that treated of simianised or otherwise othered physiognomy, is registered in these figural poses of non-address which become, in turn – as with Pearse’s profile – both

discarded and irradiated by the *punctum* or by their sense of aftermath. This is to say that, when Pearse's sideways pose no longer registers the sentiment it was, originally, intended to register, or no longer *only* this sentiment, it becomes available to us through symbolic decomposition. To place a facilitating limit on this, I will be locating my revised *eikon* of Francis between this image and a recent work of photographic art, Billy Quinn's *Quinn's Da*, first displayed as part of an eponymous exhibition at Dublin's Temple Bar Gallery in 1998, and taking the form of twenty-one wood-mounted photographs, touched up with acrylic and gold leaf, particularly to ensure that the figures stand out from the background as matte-on-gloss and suggest tempera icons on gold leaf. This exhibition, like the earlier *Icon Series* (1997), consciously models its images on religious effigies, but also 'quotes' James McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*, better known as 'Whistler's Mother' (1871) – another iconic profile pose. The use of cultivated compositional or postural otherness in this series of images is latently framed or re-marked by Quinn's emphasis, elsewhere, on the themes of child abuse, recovery, and sexual dissidence; it is not clear which category *Quinn's Da* falls into, allowing it to be imaginatively overlaid by all three.

The conceit of beholder-denial explored by Michael Fried continues to be significant here. In particular, I find this visual scheme useful for account for the degree, and type, of readerly absorption or immersion invoked by pictorial textual 'images', and by McGahern's Thomist or Augustinian interest in dilated meditation or rumination on lost images in his work. Figural or facial absorption, distraction, or non-address – that which is legible on the facial *machine* outlined above through reference to Deleuze and Guattari, in alienated form, if only through negation, or through the *absence of address* – is a re-mark in itself, since it declares the image to be 'at once facing the beholder as an artefact and closed to him or her as representation', and should be understood

as an ongoing effort to make paintings [or photographic images] that by one strategy or another appear – in the first by depicting personages wholly absorbed in what they are doing, thinking, and feeling, and in multi-figure paintings by binding these personages together in a single, unified composition – to deny the presence of the beholder, or to put this more affirmatively, to establish the ontological fiction that the beholder does not exist.¹⁶

The beholder *does*, however, exist, and the image's status as an image is contingent on the 'light' of visual apprehension; beholder-denial is pursued precisely *because* of this, so that the beholder may be 'stopped and held before the canvas.' It is, in other words, a representational scheme committed ultimately to observation *over time*: to a measured or ruminant encounter facilitated by the re-marking of *psychic privacy* on behalf of both subject and object, beholder and composition. My argument for Susan's enigmatic signification within the closed-off context of Mrs Finan's memory in Chapter Two made a claim for this; in Chapter Three, our attention to sodomitical scenes as representational gestures which inaugurate or subtend fantasies of psycho-social dominance and excessive hetero-visibility is contingent on our ability to contemplate them athwart the proscriptive implications of narrative. It may be said that all or most works of visual description, especially ecomimetic ones, appeal to readerly contemplation, but the peculiar operation of this in McGahern's work relates, I would argue, to the writer's significant concern with interiority and character privacy – with the limits of 'a world in which we can reign', constituted artificially, or supplementarily. This allows us to encounter figures like Francis and Susan, or Elizabeth Reegan, or Quinn's Da or Patrick Pearse, as emblems of limited communicative value: as enigmatic signifiers in themselves. Think of one of Fried's most persuasive examples, the vacant expression of Eduard Manet's barmaid at the Folies-Bergère – a study of psychic interiority which, far from suggesting some ethical or didactic commitment to the examined life, presents human mechanisation as a prerequisite of consumer culture. As in

McGahern, this is less a conscious political aim than an accidental – autonomous – hazard of *realism*; for Fried, ‘Manet’s art represents the last attempt in Western painting to achieve a full equivalent to the great realist painting of the past, an attempt which led [...] to the founding of modernism through the emphasis on pictorial qualities and problems in their own right’, an event of *alienation* from realist mimesis which was, or is, still tethered to the mimetic claims of traditional realism.¹⁷ This amounts to an obligation to represent alienation, and to develop forms for the expression of alienation, an economy in which the *sinthome* has a crucial role to play as a ‘join’ both declaring and severing the relation of subject to the objective or self-alienating schematics of ideology: two forms of estrangement – alienation *in* ideology and alienation *from* ideology. It is hoped that the arguments and direction of this dissertation so far have created a condition in which this proposition makes sense, and in which its relation to self-extensibility and enigmatic signification is evident. It provides a backdrop for a revision of Francis with implications for all of McGahern’s work.

4.2 *The Dead*

Joyce’s short story has been a source of several examples in the course of this dissertation; it is also employed by Conor Carville as a vehicle for Carville’s own alternative mode of approach to Irish studies, identity, and the postcolonial. This is founded on a ‘profound ambiguity’ present in Frederic Jameson’s conception of ‘modernist style’; in particular, that ‘disruptions in perception wrought by geopolitical transformation’ and the incommensurability of life in the centre with that of the margin – the afterlife of the poetics of spice, when such representational consolations evolve beyond use, leaving us with wasted particulars – result in a form of textual aporia which mediates ‘between local relativism and global objectivity to produce a new configuration which is neither one nor the other’, but alienated from both.¹⁸ In a significant way, Carville/Jameson’s

formulation of this resembles the extraction of value-affect from political economy in Antonio Negri's analysis, since both phenomena involve an abrupt detachment of the subject, image, or event from the ideological system it had hitherto been implicated in: in Carville/Jameson's case, this 'results in a deterritorialization whereby contingent physical objects of perception are made available for investment with new meanings', *none of which*, however, are stable or authoritative.¹⁹ This is precisely the semantic instability of absence-as-presence and object-triggers lost in the world discussed, in relation to McGahern's 'The Image', in Chapter Two, and is also offers a way in which we might consider McGahern's writing to be influenced by, or contribute to, Irish modernism. The potential for overcoding the domestic opening scene of *The Barracks*, for instance, imported via associations with Dutch painting and administrative architecture, constitutes a rich deterritorialisation of the more conservative assertion that such a scene is an example of sheer mimesis, or even abstract existentialism. Each potential palimpsest irradiates and destabilises the last. When Carville applies this sensibility to 'The Dead', the result is a keen attention to objectal *surfaces*, it results in a concession to the fact that modernist style 'consequently fails in its attempts to read the world that imperialism has rendered unreadable', obliging it to oscillate between 'the splintered and the whole', fixing on instances of surface description (of Gabriel Conroy's face, for example), in which 'each individually itemized element is powerfully specific, though they fail to add up to a quantifiable whole', presenting instead a kind of colour-and-substance field: 'the otherness of colonized, subaltern space subsists only as an absence [...] filled out by images the meaning of which, while seemingly fixed, are also radically unstable.'²⁰ This can be explained as a postcolonial variant on enigmatic signification, and my reading of the estranging potential of non-address comes under it: 'the ideological allegory [...] is subverted by the unfamiliar sensorium.'²¹

The preparation of Johnny Murphy's body for burial in *Rising Sun* presents us with a scene that might also be illuminated through insertion into this critical field. I have already

discussed Johnny as structurally othered within the context of *Rising Sun*'s community, both by his emigration and his negative sexuality, as well as by the fact that he cannot return to the lake, and when two of his neighbours engage in the mortal obligation of cleaning and dressing his corpses this otherness extends to the entire scene, becoming, arguably, somewhat disconcerting. Rutledge and Kelly's actions – removing Johnny's clothing, watch, and false teeth, wallet, penknife, comb, keys, betting slips, and rosary beads – efface those markers of Johnny's performed identity by which we have come to know him so far, as a raconteur, a bet-placer, a worker, a dart-thrower, and an actor; in the end, our attention is drawn to the sexual once again, and once again, as in the case of Patrick Ryan, delineated negatively: Rutledge closes the body's rectum with cotton wool, an act 'as intimate and warm as the act of sex'.²² The depiction of rudimentary embalment which takes place towards the end of McGahern's novel is already a depiction of a strange and marginal practice, since, as David Sherman's analysis reflects, modernity medicalises those thanatopolitical rituals which, in *Rising Sun*, are at the centre of this dying community's relational nexus, and made visible in the orderly way in which Johnny is treated after his death. That this care and regard does not atone for the structural violence which resulted in Johnny's solitary and exiled life, nor intrude upon his intimate consciousness, makes it all the more important that we recognise these rituals as self-alienating. The priest at Johnny's funeral who makes a speech about emigration does not tell *Johnny's* story, but he does tell one which has resonance for the community and nation generally, whilst the logic for burying Johnny with his head to the west accords with the tradition that gives the novel its name. "He sleeps with his head in the west....so that when he wakes he may face the rising sun.' Looking from face to face and drawing himself to his full height, Patrick Ryan stretched his arm dramatically towards the east. 'We look to the resurrection of the dead" (Jamesie later remarks that the underworld, whether heavenly or hellish, must be 'vastly overcrowded' by now). When Johnny is prepared for waking, however, and encountered naked by Rutledge and Kelly, 'The innate sacredness of each single life [stands] out more starkly in death than in the whole of its natural life', by dint of the

anonymising or self-alienating semantic austerity of a body which has become ‘the personification of transcendence’.²³

Transcendence is a slippery concept. We might consider it a positive version of the productive or promiscuous meaninglessness, the radical plurality of meaning, accruing to objects and events in the context of Jameson and Carville’s global disconnect: a process which undercuts grand narratives and symbolic paradigms, creating space, one much suggest, for such volatile object-triggers as the oilcloth shopping bag. I am intending the detrital or abject implications of the corpse to continue to have a spectral bearing here, since the corpse is a compelling vector for necessary otherness (for, we might say, *innate sacredness*) in the social and political sphere. Within McGahern’s work, as has been shown, there is a lot of repetition – of names, locations, objects, incidents – but this repetition, I would argue, *does not allow stable meanings to sediment*, raising the question of what *is* stable in McGahern’s work: many readers might well answer with *style*. Style, McGahern has written, is an expression of the self, and Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s *The Islandman* is read as an example of precisely this kind of expression: ‘If we think of the style as the person, the revelation of personality in language, and that the quality of the personality is more important than the material out of which the actual pattern is shaped, then the opposite can be argued: style itself must be the outcome of a view of reality.’ As an expression of personality, style is also the outcome of a *view* of reality, meaning that personality and view of reality as essentially inextricable; personality emerges from a view of reality which is, in *The Islandman* especially, ‘at no time a personal view and [never] at variance with the values of [Ó Criomhthain’s] society as a whole’ – perhaps paradoxically, it is a personal manifestation of impersonal or communal conviction.²⁴ McGahern does not suggest that this congruence between individual and community is applicable in the modern era; it is, in fact, ‘closer to Mount Olympus’, suited to the isolationist ethos of the pre-societal communities also highlighted in the writer’s commentary on Alistair MacLeod, a writer whose ‘careful work’, for McGahern, ‘never appears to stray beyond

what quickens it, and [whose] uniqueness is present in every weighted sentence and the smallest of gestures.²⁵

In *Writing the Irish West*, Eamon Wall contends with the McGahern's simultaneous immersion in and detachment from the quotidian reality of a naturalist vision of rural life. The 'inner formality' of the writer's style, a practiced primitivism of grammar and consistency of imagery especially evident from *Amongst Women* on, is interpreted by Wall as both proof of authorial control and of a need, on behalf of the writer, to preserve a sense of distance. It is 'simultaneously a reminder of the inseparability of the author from the personal background that underlines the work and a pointed towards McGahern's need, as a literary artist, to adopt the pose the outsider so that his material will assume its required formal and moral frame.'²⁶ Such a gesture would also position McGahern as a mediator between his cosmopolitan audience and the vernacular realities he purports to fictionalise, and underscore the figuration of the writer as 'chronicler'. While McGahern's real-life immersion in the lanes and fields of Leitrim may be seen as factual, however, as part of the habits, hexis, and *mentalité* of the farmer-writer who returned to his home province in middle-age, its operation in these critical interpretations is *ideological*: 'the world-view of a different social actor [the reader], whose movements duplicate the perimeter of rural *mentalité* [the world of work and social relations], but completely reverse its symbolic associations', a reversal effected between the mediator McGahern's 'reconstruction' of this world and the reader's reception of it.²⁷ The same may be said for Ó Criomhthain and, at least in the sense in which McGahern interprets him, MacLeod, because both writers present 'knowable worlds' that are, in effect, supplements. Ó Criomhthain's isolation is idiosyncratic, but in McGahern (or, I would argue, MacLeod), it must be contextualised and posited as a dwindling or dying state on the cusp of extinction, plumbed for its ancient impulses but finally ceded to the passage of time. As such, it enters into a dialogue with modernity and becomes more anxiously oriented towards filiation in response. The potential for this filial anxiety to enter, as I would

contend, the realm of the *sinthome*, to prove itself a symptom of ideological enmeshment which promises (dreadful) pleasure and thus subverts the intentional program of its ideological inscription, is actually worked out in *No Great Mischief*, a novel which McGahern has not commented on. Perhaps significantly, the writer's praise for MacLeod's heroically isolated, stoic, but soon-to-be-extinct Scottish communities in Cape Breton is technically reserved for the short stories, a form which 'does not generally flourish in such a society but comes into its own like song or prayer or superstition in poorer more fragmented communities where individualism and tradition and family and localities and chance or luck are dominant.'

That *No Great Mischief* is a novel potentially complicates or taxes the qualities McGahern finds worthy of praise in MacLeod, although this also features a toughened, close-knit Scottish clan ('*Clan Calum Rua*') being slowly dissolved by the encroachment of modernity on Cape Breton. Its protagonist Alexander MacDonald is known as *gille beag ruaidh* (little red-headed boy) in the context of a clan which can trace its heritage to the arrival of its founder in 1779, and which reproduces many inheritances, including black and red hair, multiple members named Alexander or referred to as *gille beag ruaidh*, and, it would appear, tragedy – the demographic MacLeod focuses on work as 'fishermen, miners, smallholders, loggers, lighthouse keepers, migrant workers', and are frequently subject to early deaths as a result.²⁸ When Alexander's parents and brother are killed crossing a frozen harbour, he and his twin sister are dispatched to 'the town' and experience a middle-class childhood detached and separate from the traditional coarseness of their brothers' lives in the bush. As an adult Alexander and Catherine come to exist on the fringes of the warm, irreverent, but fatally insular world they have emerged from, and a sense of guilt or discomfort characterises their interactions after they marry out of it. In a strange episode which seems almost fabulist and breaks with the keenly naturalist texture of the novel, Catherine travels to Aberdeen with and drives out to Moidart, the point of origin of her clan, for

the first time.²⁹ It seems unlikely that any of the Canadian MacDonalds have been able to make this journey before. As her brother narrates, Catherine meets a woman on the strand:

‘You are from here,’ said the woman.

‘No,’ said my sister, ‘I’m from Canada.’

‘That may be,’ said the woman. ‘But you are really from here. You have just been away for a while.’

This woman, a ‘guide’, takes Catherine to a stone cottage where they encounter an elderly man and a number of women: “Some,’ of them, my sister recalled to me, ‘had red hair and some had hair as black or blacker than my own. All of them had the same eyes’:

[The woman] said everything in Gaelic, and then I began to speak to her and to them in Gaelic as well. I don’t even remember what I said, the actual words or the phrases. It was just like it was running deep within me and suddenly burst forth. And then they all began to speak at once, leaning towards me as if they were trying to pick up a distant but familiar radio signal even as they spoke [...]

‘It is as if you had never left,’ said the old man. ‘Yes,’ said the others all at once, ‘as if you had never left.’³⁰

On first reading, this scene presents a diasporic fantasy of return to the Old World; in this it is, however, less a case of leisured curiosity than an *unheimlich* encounter with spectres. The sense of homeliness Catherine feels, ‘as if [she] had never left’, is also made moving by the fact that she is, as an adult, adrift from a point of origin held up, in the *Clan Calum Rua*, as inviolate. An important portion of the plot of *No Great Mischief* involves the current *gille beag ruaidh*, Alexander, and two fatal interactions with other members of the family named Alexander: a cousin of the

same name dies in a mining accident, whilst another causes a brawl to break out between clan members and the French-Canadian workmen of mine. This event leads to Alexander's brother being tried and jailed for murder, ultimately becoming a displaced alcoholic, to whom Alexander makes a guilty pilgrimage every week from his own prosperous life.

In this family, for which '[the] compulsion for genealogy is marked by an insistence on the predestined for fear that it might be gripped by the precarious', members have their personal stories plotted and substantiated before their birth and after their death, contributing to an ongoing narrative of inevitability and obligation which is, in light of these occurrences, societally problematic.³¹ When police officers arrive at a MacDonald funeral to arrest one of them their sense of undifferentiated identity is shown to be increasingly at odds with the assimilated Canada of which they are citizens:

'We've come for MacDonald,' said the officer in charge. There was a ripple of laughter through the crowd and various shouts of 'Right here.' 'Over here.' All of the officers were from outside the local area and it probably had not entered their minds that almost all of us were named MacDonald.³²

This necessary separateness from the state is a condition of the heroic isolation McGahern admires in MacLeod and Ó Criomhthain, the latter of whose Blasket Island-dwellers 'stand outside history. There is no sense of national pride. The rumblings of a new Ireland are brushed aside as distant noise, [Ernie] O'Malley's Ireland, or Parnell's or Redmond's or Yeats's or Pearse's'. There is also no description of the island and it only emerges as an abrupt material presence through work; '[a] mountain is there to be climbed, turf has to be cut and won and creeded home.'³³ This elemental style is, of course, not employed by twenty-first-century MacLeod, but it is worth noting that the adult Alexander, like his sister, now stands outside this

separate community and is comfortable with modern Canadian life. In its opening lines, *No Great Mischief* almost literally registers those ‘idle stretches to be filled with contemplation of the daffodil’ which, as McGahern remarks, *The Islandman* lacks – MacLeod describes a highway in autumn as ‘the manifestation of a poem by Keats.’³⁴ This is also the case in *Rising Sun*, a work which focuses on the interactions of a remote community in the last years of its quasi-isolation, but which is composed of contemplative descriptions of seasons and landscape. Both works represent scant communities characterised by repetition and ritual, but the reading public they are aimed at and the writers who mediate them are attached more conclusively to the evolved cosmopolitanism of the literary market. The first phase of joy in reading them, then, relates to the limited amount of marketable *affect* proffered under the sign of a lost localism, and perhaps a lost filiation, unavailable to the postmodern subject except vicariously. As I have stressed and will continue to stress, however, this point of access to affect can only exert a limited amount of control, and, while significant, readerly engagement can be against or in excess of it. In the case of *No Great Mischief*, for instance, I would propose that the apparent autonomy of filiation results in a sense of uncanniness which problematises both the appeal of ancestral filiation and the flight from the more chauvinist elements of this proposed by modern life.

Catherine’s experience in Moidart brings the kind of transcendental functionality which McGahern’s sees in Ó Criomhthain to bear on the MacDonald family’s genealogy, and it is this which makes aspects of *No Great Mischief* uncanny. In the very overdetermined certitude of their origins, Cynthia Sugars argues, the clan ensures that the production of meaning inaugurated by what Said called ‘beginnings’ obscures or invalidates individual claims to authenticity; being one *gille beag ruaidh* in a line means that Alexander’s status is that of a double or substitute, especially where the more ill-fated Alexanders are concerned. Such ‘duplication and counterfeiting’ echoes, for Sugars, those postmodern processes of pixilation and instrumentalisation which lead to a popular ‘reinvestment’ in filiation both, I would argue, satisfied and problematised by the

diasporic fantasy of MacLeod's novel.³⁵ Here, it is a connection that disconnects. As Catherine is re-absorbed into a more authentic strain of her clan, her identity is eclipsed by it, turning her into one of an unnamed number of women with the 'same eyes' whose voices take on an autonomy that is materially opaque, since their conversation has no discernible meaning, and rather manifests as something 'running deep' within them: a symptom or an involuntary expression, 'inhospitable [*unheimlich*] and opaque'. The meaning this particular beginning produces for MacLeod signals a state of ambivalent belonging suspended in the oral – *gille beag ruaidh*, for instance, is rendered with several different spellings in the text that do not alter it phonetically but suggest that it is recalcitrant to symbolic representation. The identity of the *gille beag ruaidh* is contingent, and Sugars considers the proliferation of namesakes and ancestors to suggest the Derridean supplement, undermining the very search for authenticity implied by filiation. If the *double*, for Freud and for Otto Rank, 'was originally an insurance against destruction to the ego, an "energetic denial of the power of death",' and later a manifestation of the superego which 'watches' the subject from without, this autonomous force for filiation might be considered the *Geist* or animus of the *Calum Rua* itself.³⁶ With the above reading of *No Great Mischief* I have attempted to strategically over-emphasise investment in the claims to inheritance and filiation contained in this. The result, paradoxically, is the potentially enabling paradox that Alexander and Catherine's filial orientation towards their clan subsumes, or dissolves, or alienates in such a way that the autonomous phenomenon of *Calum Rua* undercuts their claim to stable selfhood. The *gille beag ruaidh* is, in effect, a citation.

I have invoked MacLeod's image of proliferation as a relational pattern in the hope of moving towards an engagement with what Terence Brown has posited as a 'critically enabling', and explicitly Irish, 'interrogation of the self' – specifically via a 'Keatsian and Borgesian' vision of Shakespeare, which Brown accounts for by analysing the role of the mask and of the antithesis between true and performed, or single and proliferative, self in the work of W.B. Yeats. Brendan

Thomas Mitchell has recently responded to this with reference to McGahern, reading the writer's 'emerging' sense of 'self' in *The Dark* alongside that of Stephen/Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Mitchell particularly argues for the dynamic relation between self and world worked out in either *bildungsroman*, and makes evident, I feel, the deceptively problematic authority of 'self' as a qualitative phenomenon. This essay also adheres to the essentially conservative style of interpretation I am hoping to unsettle here, and so it is worth including it in a brief consideration of pedagogical selfhood in McGahern, in conjunction with Brown.

For Mitchell, identity is presented as something organic, possessing what Brown would call 'the givenness of a natural phenomenon'; it emerges as 'an expression of personal feelings and identity' against or in dialogue with 'the domestic, religious and psychological tensions' of Irish society.³⁷ This is less a theoretical position than a reflexive sense of the self as an individual intellect – although it is significant that Mitchell invokes the ornery Patrick Kavanagh-esque reaction against 'revivalist culture', and emphasis on the true self as a naturalist annotator of encounters with the world. 'Yeats's view of the 'anti-self', formed to mask personal feelings and identity' is pitted against this, although, arguably, the Yeatsian anti-self is better understood as an enabling proliferation of possible selves which are assumed and explored for the purpose of more fully illuminating and nuancing the category of 'self'. McGahern, moreover, as Mitchell himself points out, 'greatly admired Yeats's expression of personal inner conflict as well as Joyce's 'classical and objective style in *Dubliners*', and that of Flaubert, and '[this] artistic and critical distance influences McGahern art, [although] the author's distinctive inner self is rooted in personal experiences.'³⁸ This repeated recourse to the singular 'inner self' appears to amount, in Mitchell's analysis, to an argument for the biographical overtones of the *Portrait* and *The Dark*, which is not the same thing as saying that any specific formulation of selfhood emerges from either of these. Mitchell's reading operates from the assumption that the self is akin to character, and may be sketched conclusively; in *The Dark*, then, the 'shattered' self of a tormented

adolescent disturbs this, only to be remedied somewhat by the adoption of critical distance at a later stage in the text, a shift which ‘allows the reader to empathize with the suffering individual’ – and also to pass judgment on him. The protagonist ‘young’ Mahoney, on deciding to surrender the opportunity he has been given to attend university, is cast by Mitchell as ‘deeply insecure [since] unlike Stephen in *A Portrait*, he fails to make informed choices which will free him from the restrictions of his environment.’³⁹ This particular criticism recurs in readings which insist on judging the protagonist’s decision not to pursue further pedagogical initiation as always negative and disappointing. Critical petulance on this point reflects both an investment in the citational self and, perhaps, a slightly defensive sense of the automatic superiority of the academy to the ‘safe job’; there is also a gendered element, derived in part from the presumptions of the *bildungsroman* and the reflexively masculine implications of ‘selfhood’ as it interacts, incorporates, rejects, and generally negotiates pedagogical heritage.

The Shakespearean self Brown posits is different. It is linked instead to the Yeatsian play of masks, and especially to the negative capability of Keats, or the non-self of an essay on Shakespeare by Borges. This Shakespeare offers, through his elusive personal myth and the parade of vivid character types who people his plays, ‘[a] concept of the self, of the human subject, as fictively open to dramatic representation in many guises, rather than with any Victorian notion of ‘character’ as a given in which destiny is implicit.’⁴⁰ The elision or disruption posed by this anti-self is similar, perhaps, to the ‘self-*jouissance*’ of Bersani’s revised definition of narcissism, since the protection of a dissimulating anti-selfhood, imagined as a most intense and private experience of sensation, would theoretically guard against irreversible decantation into a single self ‘in which destiny is implicit’ – uncovered or composed through solipsism, conflict, or pedagogical labour, but always already present and authoritative. An important question suggested by this critical lens, for Brown, is ‘whether the Irish recruitment of Shakespeare [by Yeats and Joyce, for instance] to a version of selfhood that emphasised the dialectical and

performative quality of personal identity did not bear on the problematics of social and national identity, when these were in flux in the early years of this [the twentieth] century.’ Two instances of Shakespearean quotation in *The Dark* register two potential uses of this: in the first, the protagonist’s idle and associative engagement with *Macbeth* (‘tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow’), which Sampson reads as a snatch of ‘existential’ brooding, and in the second ‘Old’ Mahoney’s performance of tragicomic despair on the ‘stage’ in the ‘townland of Cloone’ on which he is ‘playing’ his life before an audience of mere ‘childer’.⁴¹ Stanley Van der Ziel’s Beckettian reading of *The Dark*, which argues that the text’s movement between first, second, and third person models the protagonist’s search for his identity, also responds to the idea of identity in flux. In a related way, McGahern’s essay ‘What Is My Language?’ loosely echoes the ubiquitous question of Irish Studies, ‘what ish my nation’, taken from *Henry V*, and chooses to answer this conclusively through recourse to filiation: in this, it may perhaps be aligned with the qualification Brown applies to the shifting self of Shakespearean Irishness. ‘It might be instructive [...] to note that the Keatsian and Borgesean Shakespeare (with very few textual exceptions) in the later twentieth century found their dangerous home in literature north of the Irish border’ where, as Brown sees it, the promiscuous identity of the anti-self has been ambivalently hitched to the suspended, amoral, or dissimulating proliferations of atrocity and destruction. In light of this, Brown retreats somewhat from the heroically protean self, and posits the ‘necessary restoration of self and society in a recognisably human order of things’ instead.⁴²

This sense of moral discomfort with the abstract ecstasies of the anti-self, where these are seen to take on a malevolently material life as violence, would appear to call automatically for a restoration of the inborn self. However, such an action would also risk reinstituting the socialised superego of the *ideological* self, in turn a source, for Bersani, of chauvinism. It is in fact wrong to read ‘self-*jouissance*’ as destructive: this concept it is aimed, rather, at making use of an earlier and more holistic, and embodied and erotic, form of ‘self-knowledge’, an experience which restages

the ‘shock’ of what Bersani explains as the memory of inauguration into the socialised self. This state, theorised through Freud, is closer to the pre-symbolic self of infancy, prior to ‘ego boundaries’, and involves the voluntary and masochistic surrender of these boundaries to the temporary intensity of *jouissance*. It is not, crucially, a complex way of presenting the more prosaic form of loss associated with castration, but ‘masochism not as pleasure in pain so much as the pleasure of at once losing the self and discovering it elsewhere, inaccurately replicated.’⁴³ I have discussed some manifestations of this in McGahern’s work in previous chapters. Here, I am moving towards a more isolated reconsideration of Francis facilitated by this particular figure for decentred selfhood – by, that is, an ambivalent oscillation between performative selfhood and the silence, emptiness, or ‘blankness’ of non-identity.

4.2 *Francis*

This is not the silence, exile, and cunning of artistic intent, but the non-address of the bleakly unknowable figure McGahern, in his final work and nearing the end of his own life, confessed to have never understood. That Francis-figures recur in his work suggests an unfulfilled desire to do so, or to continue contemplating his father’s austere personality and theatrical personal manner, dilating engagement, as has been explained in Chapter Three, with memories and encounters that are sometimes ‘intolerable’ and often bewildering:

I knew him better [than] I knew any living person, and yet I had never felt I understood him, so changeable was he, so violent, so self-absorbed, so many-faced. If it is impossible to know oneself, since we cannot see ourselves as we are seen, then it may be almost as difficult to understand those close to us, whether that closeness be of enmity or love or their fluctuating tides. We may have an

enormous store of experience and knowledge because we are too close, still too involved. There was also something dark or forbidding in his personality that made people reluctant to speak about him, and he himself never offered any explanation for anything he ever did.

This passage, toward the end of *Memoir*, reflects McGahern at his most existentially acute and expressively gentle; gone, or outgrown, are the jagged soliloquys of *The Pornographer* or the strained passages of *The Leavetaking*, replaced with a contemplative and affecting style of slow, deliberate, and deceptively emotive presentation. There is also more going on here than in many previous passages of *Memoir* which deal or attempt to deal with Francis. It is impossible to know Francis, but also impossible to *know oneself*, a phrase which suggests some affinity between father and son, or reader and character, which resides in the limit presented to us by our own perceptual faculties. It is possible that Francis, who offers no explanation for his erratic and often brutal behaviour towards his family, his neglect of his dying wife, his many failed strategies of familial manipulation, does not even know himself:

‘Your father is an actor,’ I heard some people say over the years, and it had a ring of truth, without that truth becoming clear.

‘You mean he doesn’t know who he is and acts out his life in parts?’

‘He’s an actor.’ They would say nothing further. ‘Which of us knows who we are?’⁴⁴

Who is this ‘they’ who speaks here? Do they know ‘who’ *they* ‘are’? Is this representative of a community consensus of some sort? The fact of Francis’s status as an actor – certainly borne out, in the most obvious sense, by his fondness for didactic quotation and throwing of theatrical tantrums – is left to hang in suspension or speculation here, like his identity. The Shakespeare

Brown points to in Yeats is felt, historically, as a proliferation of almost impossibly vivid characters paradoxically underwritten by a deep sense of emptiness and immensity. A similarly radical oscillation between the specific and the undifferentiated is present in Francis, a man who lives his life 'in roles', the 'happiest' of which was a role associated with sanctioned or organised violence in the IRA, 'where his propensity for violence was tempered by cold calculation and a keen sense of self-preservation.'⁴⁵ McGahern has some sympathy for his father's lifelong disappointment in the aftermath of insurrection, and the first of Francis's 'doubles' or likenesses we might consider here is the ex-soldier and memoirist Ernie O'Malley, whose accounts of the War of Independence and Civil War in *Another Man's Wound* and *The Singing Flame* are praised by McGahern in numerous essays and reviews; the writer links this admiration with his memories of, or sense of, his father, and the man-of-action O'Malley is mediated as a more positive or generous image of wartime Francis:

On Another Man's Wound becomes the story of that war through O'Malley's eyes. What emerges is a picture of a brave, daring, headstrong young leader, without gifts of tact or patience, too dedicated to military theory and textbook strategy, in a countryside that had little use for anything but the immediate and the practical. Upbringing had combined with temperament to make him half an alien among his own people.⁴⁶

Through this comparison, the tactless and impatient Francis (capable, at the same time, of strategic charm) is elevated somewhat, and this vision of him is reflected in another, rather remarkable, anecdote of his military youth relayed in *Memoir*: in this, the soldier Francis returns to his mother's farm, abruptly and clandestinely, to save high during his season on the road, appearing in a field 'dressed in a tailored suit, white shirt, tie, new shoes', none of which he removes during the course of the work. His neighbours are 'plainly proud of his authority and

striking good looks', but even more by 'his stance and vanity.'⁴⁷ Throughout *Memoir* and in the guise of some of his avatars, Francis is depicted in his police sergeant's uniform, 'shining' and attending to his many ceremonially phallic and prosthetic appendages – buttons and belts (*The Barracks*), knives (*Memoir*), keys ('The Key'), and watches ('Wheels').

Although the father-sergeant figure of *The Barracks* shares the least amount of characteristics with the Francis of *Memoir*, his morning ritual on court day anticipates one of the significant ceremonies of Francis's month. All members of Sergeant Reegan's household, including his wife Elizabeth and her step-children, must facilitate his dressing, washing, shaving, and eating, until, 'last of all', the 'short vicious stick of polished hickory' used, in *Memoir*, to give an unprompted beating to a local drunk, is 'hung from the belt of his tunic' and completes his transformation into psycho-social cipher for authority and unspoken violence.⁴⁸ Reegan's ritual shaving is dwelt upon:

He took down the plain wooden box that held his shaving-kit from the top of the medicine press and opened it on the sewing-machine to get his cut-throat razor and he stroked it over and back on a strip of leather tacked to the side of the press. After he'd tested its sharpness he laid it carefully on a newspaper in the window and searched the box for the brush and stick of soap.⁴⁹

An unnamed daughter administers to Reegan during this sequence. It both prefigures the strap of leather which will be used to threaten Young Mahoney in *The Dark* and foreshadows a significant, even primal, scene of *Memoir*, in which McGahern recalls an unnerving encounter with his father's 'cut-throat' razor in infancy:

Late at night the small blue car arrived with my father in one of his black moods. This focused instantly on my face, which was covered with scabs from a childhood disease, probably impetigo [...] he ordered Bridgie McGovern to boil water, got a basin and mirror and towel and sharp knife, and disinfected the water and knife. Then he proceeded to remove all the scabs with the knife. I was terrified of him – the knife, the ceremony that was as fixed as an execution.⁵⁰

This is not the first time Francis performs a form of displaced castration: earlier in childhood, he has forcibly cut off his son's 'girlish' curls, much to the horror of his mother and grandmother. The steely hygiene and paternal sternness of this scene is, in itself, as theatrical and memorable – 'I was terrified of him' – as later scenes in which Francis attempts to police his adolescent children with excessive force and violence. 'Calculating' Francis is a recurring and compelling pose. In *The Barracks*, the more sympathetic Reegan is not calculating, but he is distracted: shortly after the shaving sequence, he eats and sits by the same window (by the sewing machine, and onto the river) at which the child McGahern, in the anecdote reproduced in Chapter Two here, experiences his deep absorption in reading. Reegan's mind is 'a painless blank, watching his own face and the images of white field and river and white hill, and not relating them to anything and not thinking.'⁵¹ When Elizabeth opens a blind on a similar scene, she gasps and is awed by the beauty of the view – Reegan, however, in Francis-mode, operates mechanically, his thoughts remote from us. It is possible to picture his expression as akin to that on the face of the father-figure in *Quinn's Da*, a study of a paternal *eikon* whose eerie and occasionally detrital staticity and enigma provides, I would argue, a visual correlation to the Francis of McGahern's *oeuvre*.

Quinn's sequence of laser prints all adhere to a basic compositional model that is taken from 'Whistler's Mother': it features either 'Quinn' (the artist) or 'Da' (an elderly man) portrayed in profile, seated in high-backed chair before a vacant space illuminated, in certain instalments, by

the blue light of an unseen television screen. In the backdrop of some of these images we see a window shrouded in curtain, a radiator, and a wall, all of which suggests a sparsely-decorated living room. Those images which feature this backdrop alongside 'Da' (who, like 'Quinn' and like Whistler's mother, is dressed in black with a striking white shirt-collar) are notably sepia-toned, and look like aged colour photographs; those which feature 'Quinn' attempting to sit in his father's chair (and, in some cases, turning to the audience frontally, breaking with the profile pose) are doctored to include blue light and photographic dismemberment – one Quinn is blurred or duplicated, another is 'echoed' by a floating photographic trace of his own exposed buttocks. Where the 'son' of this pairing is featured, the atmosphere is active or disrupted, and suggestive of struggle (to occupy the father's place; to supplant the father, to defeat him?) whilst, where 'Da' occurs, staring blankly into the distance and apparently unaware that he is being photographed, the atmosphere is flatter. In those images where the background is rendered matte and the details are faded out, the images consciously and starkly resemble religious ikons. In those images where blue light, television glow, and a ghostly multiplication of limbs takes place in the grittily domestic setting of the chair, the window, and the radiator, it suggests – at least to me – the urban myth of the council house poltergeist.

I am struck by the profound and uncanny degree of non-address at work in *Quinn's Da*. In some ways, beholder-denial is undercut by 'Quinn's' turn towards the audience and decision, in the first, to feature himself as a protagonist in his own installation, but the degree of psychic absence present in the ('rigid and machinelike') face of 'Da' interacts with the tradition of facial blankness explored by Fried in a way that responds more to the self-conscious and provocative studies of psychic emptiness in Manet than with the interiority on display in works by other painters. Where Fried celebrates the depiction of imaginative and mental preoccupation in photographic art through recourse to the absorptive mode of 'throwness' in Heidegger, 'Da's' discomfiting lack of expression or mental presence profoundly re-marks alienation. Quinn's

other works on sexual dissidence, abuse survival, homosexuality, and emigration bring a nexus of vexed and latently queer issues to bear on an Irish artist whose work is, naturally, vastly remote from the muddy mysticism of Brian O'Doherty's 'Irish imagination'; at the same time, however, this is an Irish work, displayed in Ireland, and addressing, potentially, something in Irish culture. Placing it, if temporarily, within an Irish framework allows the alienating degree of mental absence and refused return, of an inscrutability that borders on inhumanly empty or non-sentient, on display in those instalments which feature 'Da' to be strategically ethnicised.

The painter Francis Bacon was technically (Anglo-) Irish. His essential absence from Irish Studies is probably a condition of the fact that this connection, a relation mined by other painters, is entirely absent from his work – try as the Dublin City Gallery may to substantiate it in their permanent exhibition, which is based around the artist's reconstructed London studio. It is tempting to place an Irish palimpsest over Bacon's depictions of bodily trauma and debasement, in spite of the self-evident violence such misreading would effect: a painter of wounds and screams is commemorated in a gallery hard-won by Augusta Gregory and W.B. Yeats, located some yards from both the 'sacred site' of the Garden of Remembrance and the site of a catastrophic tenement collapse in 1913, in the heart of a Georgian quarter whose theatrical pretensions initially spatialised eighteenth-century ascendancy interests and, ultimately, inflected the manoeuvres and dénouement of the Easter Rising. That none of this can be conscionably brought to bear on Bacon's art is, frankly, disappointing. One might, at a stretch, suggest Eddy Bacon, the father who had his son beaten by grooms on an Irish stud farm, thus fomenting an artistic interest in sadomasochism⁵²; the hard-riding country psychopath has purchase in popular memory – although it might just as well be the Marquis of Queensbury, whose induction into history via the Wilde trial also, incidentally, synthesizes Irishness and queerness – and the artist *did* relate some of the violence of his work to childhood recollections of civil war.⁵³ Perhaps there is something to be said for reclaiming Bacon after all.

Bringing Bacon, the ambivalently Irish author of world-famous psycho-somatic violence, and McGahern, a writer whose reputation threatens to be winnowed of any subversive intent, into dialogue, then, seems deliberately obscure: there is, however, at least one surprisingly prosaic justification. Although an extraordinary dearth of information exists on McGahern's experiences as an *ingénue* in London (prompted, perhaps, by an extraordinary lack of interest), his earliest forages into publication, as Sampson's recent *Young John McGahern* (2013) indicates, took place against the backdrop of a 1960s Soho-based community of artists, with an early extract from *The Barracks* appearing in *X* magazine. I cannot find any evidence that McGahern and Bacon, also present in Soho at this time, ever met, but two degrees of separation – the Dublin-born painter Patrick Swift and Swift's friend, and Bacon's model, Lucien Freud – is not very much. I do not mean to suggest that any conscious knowledge, interest, or affinity exists between these figures, but rather that Bacon's occluded Irishness is apiece with McGahern's occluded stylishness as a 'rarefied artistic persona' of the Dublin and London demi-monde; a comparison between the two is less counter-intuitive than it appears. Bacon's violence, like Gilles Deleuze's enthusiastic extrapolation of it, sometimes suggests the repetitive or arrested earnestness of a code, whilst the, often remarkable, levels of violence present in McGahern's work are blunted when absorbed into the narrative of 'old' and 'new' Ireland implied by the story of the writer's [re] discovery as a 'chronicler'. The contemporary agenda underpinning this is particularly evident in some critical readings of *The Dark*, a work which presents scenes of physical and sexual abuse that are austere in composition, suggesting something of the simplicity of expression identified by Belinda McKeon as a putatively verisimilar form of mediation. It is hoped that, in rethinking one of these scenes in light of Bacon's compositions, some of this necessary violence may be restored.

For Ernst Van Alphen, '[seeing] a painting by Francis Bacon hurts. It causes pain.' Maher has described the opening scene of *The Dark* as 'one of the most disturbing' he has read; we

might venture to say that, on some level, this also ‘hurts’ – perhaps, as Thomas McGonigle suggests, by evoking ‘awful feelings of powerless identification’.⁵⁴ For Alphen this gravitational pull relates to the ‘loss of self’ at work in Bacon and instigated (contrary to the tradition inventoried by Fried) by what we might describe as beholder-address. A work like *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962) appears to feature voyeurs, watchers, or even donors within the frame of the painting itself; in other instances, the scream of a pope or an apparently ringed-off figure faces theatrically forward and implicates the beholder directly. At the same time, however, the destructive or self-dissimulating impulses latent in Bacon paintings (especially, I would suggest, in paintings that scream) do not facilitate identification in a straightforward way; in their depictions of terror and contortion, their appeal to the viewer is also closed off by a de-familiarising degree of potency. This is not quite beholder-denial, but it does deny the coherent and comprehensible ‘selfhood’ of the beholder by emitting a gaze which does not return or reconfirm my gaze. This is sintho-matic. Bacon’s pope, as he has insisted, is not ‘his’ father, is not our father, and is not even the flesh-and-blood pope once painted by Velazquez; at the same time, *Il Papa must* be the father – must be Eddy Bacon – must be *my* father. It is not possible to cite the pope and avoid the Freudian inheritance of the *Urvater*, and so what this *Verfremdungseffekt* reveals is the magnetic or compelling but empty *jouissance* of identification with figures for the primordial father generally – figures which, like the phallus, are the bases of psycho-social organisation and identification. We exist in a relation of disconnection from Quinn’s Da, and from the caged popes of Bacon’s studies, which subtend, Norman Bryson has argued, a form of inscrutability already present in Velazquez, which ‘implies a whole ethics of maintaining the openness of the self and the social field, almost by abstention’ – or by non-address.⁵⁵

I have made reference to Carville’s reading of ‘The Dead’ to draw attention to the emergence of surfaces as a source of phenomenological vividness and fragmentation in the context of postcolonial modernism, and this sense of disconnection from established strategies of

interpretation and subsequent proliferation of unstable, local, interpretations both reflects the play of the supplement and echoes the mode of proliferative enigma at work, as I am contending here, in McGahern's 'sideways' sketches of Francis – Francis as composed of his over-determined parts, as more and less than the sum of these, as metonymised by material object-triggers which do not, for this, give us a sense of his 'true' character, furnishing instead his bombastic and violent impressions – and the duplicate profile poses of *Quinn's Da*. Both of these, like the kitschily disseminated profile pose of Pearse, reproduce native spectacle over and again in an ostensible attempt to 'understand' or account for it; they fail, consciously or necessarily, to achieve this aim, and their material leavings consist in an abundance of articulations of the psycho-social figure *father*. This emblematised fatherhood-as-failure. McGahern's disillusioned patriarchs, including Moran but also Sergeant Reegan of *The Barracks* and Old Mahoney of *The Dark*, do not, Holland stresses,

experience the authority available to them in the home as natural, inevitable, or fitting [...] Their dissatisfaction with the limited and contingent authority available to them in the domestic scene can be attributed in part to the residual presence of ambitions generated by the War of Independence [...] Though the war is not always explicitly discussed, and indeed mention of it is always yielded briefly [...] it nevertheless operates as the source and spur for many of the fantasies fathers entertain about personal freedom, fantasies which are irreconcilable with their limited franchise in the home.⁵⁶

A phrase borrowed by Holland from Kevin O'Higgins describes the aftermath of the revolution in Ireland as 'a sudden and violent return' to the normal, and captures something of this sense of aggressive or excessive banality; a reality which, in its utter immovability, takes on a menacing edge. Holland reads the performance of would-be patriarchal ascendancy that is the beating at the

beginning of *The Dark* as an expression of this impotence, since Old Mahoney never actually touches his son, but rather summons a host of borrowed discourses and uses these to verbally terrorise instead, 'haunted by his failure to exert influence in a society in which the domestic family is idealised by never rewarded', or which must be its own reward.⁵⁷ It is also possible, however, to read this 'beating' as a fantasy which articulates, or supplements, Old Mahoney's desire for violent omnipotence, and this reading would tally with the fantastic properties of the Eddie McNiff anecdote. The scenario sketched in *Amongst Women* presents a static and symbolically concentrated scene which triggers either a fantasy of violence or a fantasy of sexual encounter, or a fantasy of both. In the figure of Old Mahoney, impotence is atoned for through a fantasy of omnipotence which seeks to restore the hierarchical dynamic of the nuclear family as this formation reproduces the structural violence of the state.

¹ W.B. Yeats, 'The Statues', *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Simon Schuster, 2008), p. 362.

² Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 2003), pp. 84-85.

³ Patrick Pearse, 'O'Donovan Rossa: Graveside Panegyric', *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing II*, ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day, 1991), p. 294.

⁴ Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim, Two Boys* (New York: Scribner, 2001), p. 206.

⁵ See Patrick R. Mullen, *The Poor Bugger's Tool: Irish Modernism, Queer Labor, and Postcolonial History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 23-28.

⁶ Cheryl Herr, 'The Erotics of Irishness', *Critical Enquiry* 17.1 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 1034 [p. 16].

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Macmillan, 1979), p. 6.

⁸ Enda Duffy, *The Subaltern Ulysses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 95.

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¹⁰ Dermot McCarthy, *John McGahern and the Art of Memory* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 31.

¹¹ Stuart McLean, *The Event and its Terrors: Ireland, Famine, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004), p. 13.

¹² Luke Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization, and Irish Culture* (Galway: Arlen, 2004), p. 81.

¹³ Morton, p. 195.

¹⁴ See Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography by Lady Gregory* (London: Colin Smythe, 1972 [1913]), p. 21, and Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life I: The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 181-183.

¹⁵ Enda Duffy, *The Subaltern Ulysses* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 107.

¹⁶ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2008), pp. 39, 40.

¹⁷ Fried, 'Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella (1965)', *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Review* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1998), pp. 213-268 [p. 262].

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- ¹⁹ Ibid, p. 13.
- ²⁰ Ibid, p. 14.
- ²¹ Frederic Jameson quoted in Carville, p. 15.
- ²² John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (Faber and Faber: London, 2002), p. 288.
- ²³ Ibid, pp. 297, 310, 288, and Harrison p. 93.
- ²⁴ McGahern, 'What Is My Language?' *Love of the World: Collected Essays*, ed. Stanley Van der Ziel (Faber and Faber: London, 2009), pp. 260-274 [p. 263].
- ²⁵ Ibid p. 272 and McGahern, 'The Stories of Alistair MacLeod', *Love of the World* pp. 208-212 [p. 212].
- ²⁶ Eamonn Wall, *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (Indiana University Press: Notre Dame, 2011), p. 89.
- ²⁷ Franco Moretti, 'Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History', p. 42.
- ²⁸ 'The Stories of Alistair MacLeod', p. 208.
- ²⁹ Alistair MacLeod, *No Great Mischief* (Vintage: London, 2001), p. 146.
- ³⁰ Ibid, pp. 149-150.
- ³¹ Cynthia Sugars, 'Repetition with a Difference: The Paradox of Origins in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*', *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33.2 (2008), pp. 133-150 [p. 135].
- ³² MacLeod, p. 116.
- ³³ 'What Is My Language?', pp. 266, 263.
- ³⁴ Ibid, p. 263; MacLeod, p. 1.
- ³⁵ Sugars, p. 138.
- ³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003).
- ³⁷ Terence Brown, *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2010), p. 62, and Brendan Thomas Mitchell, 'Emergence of the Self: McGahern and Joyce', *John McGahern: Critical Essays*, ed. Raymond Mullen, Adam Bargroff, and Jennifer Mullen (Peter Lang: Bern, 2014), pp. 71-85 [pp. 74, 71].
- ³⁸ Mitchell, p. 75.
- ³⁹ Ibid, p. 83.
- ⁴⁰ Brown, p. 62.
- ⁴¹ Dennis Sampson, *John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2012), p. 10.
- ⁴² Brown, pp. 72, 73.
- ⁴³ Bersani in 'A Conversation with Leo Bersani', p. 6.
- ⁴⁴ McGahern, *Memoir*, p. 226.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ McGahern, 'In Pursuit of a Single Flame: Ernie O'Malley', *Love of the World*, pp. 246-259 [p.251].
- ⁴⁷ *Memoir*, p. 48.
- ⁴⁸ McGahern, *The Barracks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 46.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 43.
- ⁵⁰ *Memoir*, p. 23.
- ⁵¹ *The Barracks*, p. 45.
- ⁵² See Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma* (London: Constable, 2008), pp.21, 121.
- ⁵³ Peppiatt, p. 17.
- ⁵⁴ Ernst Van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (Reaktion: London, 1998), p. 9, and Thomas McGonigle, 'The Story of his Life', *Los Angeles Times* February 26th, 2006.
- ⁵⁵ Normal Bryson, 'Bacon's Dialogue with the Past', *Francis Bacon and the Tradition of Art*, ed. Wilfried Seipel, Barbara Steffen, and Christoph Vitali (Basel: Skira, 2004), pp. 43-55 [p.44].
- ⁵⁶ Siobhán Holland, 'Marvellous Fathers in the Fiction of John McGahern', *The Yearbook of English Studies* Vol. 35 (2005), pp. 186-198 [p. 187].
- ⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 190.

Conclusion

I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens, of
living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little
island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet
Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and
saw a fountain in a shop-window, and began to
remember lake water.

W.B. Yeats¹

The result of this ‘sudden remembrance’, as everyone knows, is ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’, a poem so ubiquitous on curricula that its rhythms suggest an Irish ‘Casabianca’ or ‘Kubla Khan’; like the latter, it is doubly situated, conjuring a remote island in Sligo while remaining cognisant of displacement from it. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem records an opium dream in Exmoor, while Yeats’s accounts for an acute form of nostalgia on Fleet Street: ‘[try] as it might to render naked, direct, natural experience, ecomimesis gathers to itself a host of associations between drugs, writing, intoxication, and reminiscence.’² Yeats’s poem is also doubly constituted by *Innis Fraoigh*, a site which does exist and is available to us under the remit of *dinnseanchas*, and *Innisfree*, the fortuitous transliteration which enhances its escapist theme. The place-world ‘Innisfree’ evokes is an example of ambient poetry, not only because it indicates ‘that which surrounds the narrator; what surrounds, by a metaphorical extension, the page we are holding’, but also because its affective capacities relate intimately to recitation; ‘Innisfree’, like many of Yeats’s poems, is well-known as a mnemonic cultural object with national and pedagogical associations.³ For Kate, the woman who will become the protagonist’s mother in *The Leavetaking*, and who is an early

avatar of Susan McGahern, 'What gives me most pleasure from my own schooling are the poems I learned by heart then; constantly I find them passing through my mind, not unlike old friends or stray strands of music, while I hardly remember anything else with pleasure from the same schooling.'⁴ These include Yeats's 'The Poet Pleads with His Friend for Old Friends', echoing McGahern's own interest in the poet, to whom he credits the youthful realisation that literature could mean more than 'marvellous stories' and relate instead to moral activity.⁵ Dennis Sampson places emphasis on this intersection of Susan's influence and the 'discovery of the 'poetical personality' in language [...] the appreciation of something mysterious, akin to magic, that could become available' to the reader.⁶

There is another sense in which 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' invokes the *topos* of an attuned alternative space. As a 'double' hovering over the original and absent Innis Fraoigh, is a forerunner of fairyland; a 'place', as Deirdre Toomey has shown, which also functions as a euphemism for mental distress, and registers another Susan. Yeats's mother, 'the silent, difficult, disappointed'⁷ Susan Yeats *née* Pollexfen, was already 'away' when her son became interested in folk synonyms for insanity, and suffered from what her family appear to have interpreted as debilitating homesickness.⁸ Toomey and Terence Brown attempt to restore Susan to the broader imaginary of Yeats's romantic nationalism: feminised loss, and feminised orality, processed through a masculine impetus to 'revolt into style'. In spite of its origin 'Innisfree' does not read like a poem of exemplary isolation, but rather as a piece of lyric introspection which contracts instead of expanding, and finds its affective genesis in an ornament, a 'combination of vividness and distancing, naturalness and artifice'.⁹ At another point in his autobiography, Yeats recalls homesick conversations with a sister on a park bench close to 'a water fountain' in London, suggesting something of a pattern and drawing obscure awareness to features of the urban environment as fonts, both literally and metaphorically, for 'the generated soul'. There is some ironic affinity to be observed between the petty genteelism of water fountains, impoverished

substitutes for lakes, and Susan Yeats, suffering for love of rural Sligo in a garden suburb. From the near-contemporaneous *Land of Heart's Desire* on, Yeats's constructions of fairyland or the Noh/Cuchulainoid crossover wherein many of his plays for the Abbey are set repeatedly stage the intersection of emotional longing, national sentiment, and theatrical camp: surviving photographs of a cast in full costume at the Abbey are compared, by Yeats himself, to 'fire hydrants' (water fountains, as it were), whilst Joyce's 'Circe' episode devotes time to sending up the Abbey aesthetic with the help of a primitive disco ball. It is helpful to place 'Innisfree' in this context of artificial, even decadent, ambience, not least because no noon in Ireland has ever been a 'purple glow'. Such a concession to the synthetic also places necessary emphasis on the role of objects – 'objectal substances' – in the generation of ecomimetic or mnemonic place-worlds.

The relation between mental illness and the charged landscapes of ambient art is not an arbitrary one – Nancy Scheper-Hughes has theorised high levels of schizophrenia in rural Ireland as manifest, repeatedly, in the form of delusions which fixate on spatial violations like shifting landmarks and field boundaries; in Chapter Two, this impetus was also related to both the *Lorica* form of ancient Gaelic poetry, and the 'vampire poem' of Stephen Dedalus. Troubled mothers are ubiquitous in this scene. Susan Yeats's somnambulism, and the homesickness which induced it, is even spectrally present in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' before the fact – Yeats's first attempt at a novel, the unpublished *John Sherman*, reconstructs Sligo as 'Ballah' and presents a love interest with Pollexfen mannerisms some years before 'Innisfree', even finding a place for the same event of 'sudden memory':

Delayed by a crush on the Strand, he heard a faint trickling of water near by; it came from a shop window where a little water-jet balanced a wooden ball upon its point. The sound suggested a cataract with a long Gaelic name, that leaped crying into the Gate of the Winds at Ballah¹⁰

This cosmos is less fugue-like because evocative of rawer sound. The water-jet suggests a cataract with a Gaelic name whose enunciation is perhaps as guttural and sibilant ‘as’ a cataract, but which also ‘cries’ into a gate that permits of ‘wind’ – a source of torment, possibly, or exhilaration. On the death of Yeats’s younger brother in infancy, recorded with characteristic dispassion in his *Autobiographies*, Susan reports that she has heard the cry of the banshee, an acousmatic and autonomic, ambient, sound. In both Ballah and Innisfree a sense of sensual latency, evolved in response to the cosmopolitanism of London – and thus, by extension, of Yeats *père* – invests nostalgia with the Proustian fantasy of astral projection, whereby memory is embodied and the subject can enter into Innisfree as a zone of attuned reality. Its auditory qualities, elements like alliteration and assonance, as well as rhythm, are strongly mnemonic, ensuring ease of recitation and posthumous autonomy as a cultural product; autonomy which reproduces, in turn, the spontaneous surge of affect accruing, on this one occasion, to a water-jet.

What this potted history of ‘Innisfree’ is intended to suggest is that this poem may be seen as possessing its own affective microclimate. It is far from the first or last instance of ambient poetics to inculcate a sense of synthetic ‘atmosphere’ in the reader, but Yeats takes pains to anchor its originary moment in a locational ‘Natal’; not only the Sligo of childhood but also a ‘Sligo’ of the mind, a place-world which bears no material relation to its referent but is, instead, the product of embodied memories which recreate the sensations of somatographic emplacement. Innisfree, as it is conjured in the poem, is also extemporised, occupying a ‘spot of time’, or perhaps a temporal sink into intensity; intensity, as an effect, is ‘narratively de-localized, spreading over the generalised body surfaces, like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops travelling the vertical path between head and heart’, where *function* is narrative (‘I will arise and go’) and *meaning* is nostalgia. Of course, this response can be withheld; nevertheless, there is something about ‘Innisfree’ which seems, as the brief discussion of auditory thickness

above indicates, auto-objective. In this it is staging or simulating involuntary memory. Between the poles of two or more mnemonic triggers in Marcel Proust, Julia Kristeva claims, sensations ‘gush’, substantially and dimensionally, outwards, transcending time and restoring memory *in situ* or in an alchemical suspension, an imaginary *refrain*; the trigger initiates embodied memory.¹¹ Yeats’s water-fountain quite literally gushes.

Dermot McCarthy has plotted Susan’s ultimate restoration as a trigger to mnemonic reconstitution and consolation an artistic journey analogous to the (erroneous) restoration of Eurydice by Orpheus; the *loss* of Eurydice, however, is too important a qualification to overlook. Susan’s status is similarly conditioned by absence, as she is an after-effect or a trace, manifest in McGahern’s writing via allusions which take on the role of the Derridean re-mark. By this I mean to say that traces and echoes of the apparently biographical alchemise fiction as ‘reality’. When the ‘dancing sun’ of Easter is recounted in *Rising Sun*, for instance, *Memoir* goes on to revise these as Susan’s words, just as it revises the funeral scene from *The Leavetaking* and many other, less extensive but no less evident, aspects of the writer’s fiction as putatively biographical. By comparing these to the re-mark I mean to indicate that they signal, at their appearance, an implied induction into a discrete order of signs: that of the biographical or ‘truthful’, or, rather, the purview of ‘biography’ as this is presented in *Memoir*. Where this pertains to the place-world of rural Leitrim (citational ‘Leitrim’, perhaps), such re-markable annotations may be seen to spectrally represent an absent location or *topos*, and to capitalise on the poetics of this absent, often prelapsarian, ‘Leitrim’ of the writer’s childhood. Relevant here are the poetics of spice or of peatsmoke, of traces and ambient reverberations whose spectral self-presencing articulates both the hidden or hypothetical violence of value-exchange and, as I have been arguing, the residual materiality of post-ideological quasi-substances. This is, *pace* Morton and Colin Graham, the sign for an absent signified which is consumed as a signified in itself; the self-alienation inherent in strategic essentialism thus reproduces the alienation of absent labour and concealed structural

violence. Through Negri I have been theorising a way in which the gulf between sign and signified engendered by alienation potentially restores to the encounter *with* the sign a degree of affective independence and volatility. This was considered in Chapter One as a *thingly latency*, associated with the primordial ‘thingliness’ of the corpse, and related in this way to the anxieties of origin and affiliation inaugurated by modernity and the free hand of capital.

Affect is adjacent, not reducible, to emotion, but in a case like ‘Innisfree’ the ambient poetics which seek to simulate, supplement, or otherwise extend the place-world of a fugue state which is experienced as a contraction rather than an expansion arise from and propagate nostalgic emotions. One does not have to have visited Innis Fraoigh, or any comparable pre-modern outpost, to enter into ‘Innisfree’, not least because what I believe ‘Innisfree’ to metonymise – both the fairyland of mental disturbance, and the atmospheric landscape of a Romantic tradition whose fixation on sanitised images of marginal space survives in contemporary phenomena such as tourism – are forces which vastly outlast and synthetically subtend any original notion of an island called Innis Fraoigh (or Prospero’s island, or *Irelantis*) incorporating the hyper-mediated regime of late capitalist semiotics. This persistent intertwining of pastoralism and schizophrenia, moreover, is neither whimsical nor counter-intuitive: both imaginative rhapsody and mental delusion are characterised by a physical *porousness*, or a model of the body as a material intermediary between subject and objective environment. Schepers-Hughes’s delusions of spatial violation suggest, the anthropologist believes, displaced anxieties at sexual transgression and bodily violation; a motif of being ‘taken’, ravaged, or enraptured, is also present in ‘Innisfree’ as well as other folk manifestations of fairyland (‘away’). Affect may be aggressive, or at least ambivalent, in its encounters with the body, encounters which always originate in expression rather than communication. Affect is latent, beyond the ‘invariant generative rules’ of a signifying system. As should be implied by the above, what Massumi

describes as affect (an event of *invariance*) is not only compatible with the self-dissolution of *jouissance*, but also with the pleasure of the text.

Pleasure has been an important aspect of my analysis of ambient poetics in Irish Culture, and in the work of John McGahern. *Enjoyment*, indeed, has been figured as indispensable to *amor patria*:

And what a construct this thing is, because Scotland is a feeling; England is a *feeling*, Wales is a *feeling*, Ireland a *feeling*, but the United Kingdom is one of the greatest ideas ever invented for the modern age.¹²

In the pithiest of ways, the musician Bob Geldof – speaking at a ‘Let’s Stay Together’ rally against Scottish independence on Trafalgar Square – hits on my thesis statement, here, in a sentence: Ireland is a feeling. This might have supplied a more tongue-in-cheek title than ‘Sacred Weather’, as would ‘Enjoy Your Irishness!’, a riff on Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of Lacan and popular culture, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* Many things are going on in Geldof’s seemingly innocuous soapbox moment, not least the mild incongruity of an expatriate Irish performer appealing to the would-be statelet of Scotland from the administrative centre of southern England; the body of his speech genders the union between the UK and Scotland as a ‘marriage’, feminising Scottish national ‘genius’ such that Anglo-Saxon ‘pragmatism’ is a necessary foil to it – which is not the same as saying that there is no room for national feeling. Rather, pragmatic ideology allows for the contained play of sentiment, much as the State must allow for a limited remit of affection or *jouissance*, so that adherence to its rule is not just an intellectual decision but an embodied experience. Much of this dissertation has attempted to argue for the productive volatility of this contingency on enjoyment, and to harness the abjectly feminine (and, in this case,

condescending) implications of ‘feeling’ as it is strategically counterposed to thought, not in the interest of identity politics, but rather the opposite: in the interest of self-dissimulation. In spite of the radical degree of self-knowledge or self-recognition this process appears to offer through its emphasis on *embodied* selfhood or personhood, it is, in fact, an alienating event – one which dissolves or negates the self, and has shown itself to be latent in a number of paradoxically robotic phenomena, like the mechanisms of figural beholder-denial, or the kitsch.

Imagined community, the key ingredient of modern nationalism, might be understood a zone of consensus thought of as homogenous but contingent, in its practical application, on the eidetic apparatuses of locality. These, perhaps, are the means by which, as Gayatri Spivak suggests, ‘the love of my little corner of ground becomes the nation thing’¹³ – the ‘eidetic genealogy’ of the event of repeated perception (‘my little corner’) constructed as leading, piecemeal but according to the terms of a shared compositional logic, to national affinity, where nation-space is an apparatus unto itself.¹⁴ Intimate phenomenological encounter is indispensable to this, and it is contingent on embodied interaction with national space. *National space* – space encountered in its representative or symbolic role – is, however, an artificial or synthetic concept; so violent and extensive are the impositions of political economy on landscape, from population clearance to prettification, it almost impossible to escape the intersecting apparatuses of imagined community, ordinance survey, latitude, longitude, and legibility. The cumulative pedagogical imperatives of these are relatively recent, no older than the discursive entity of the ‘nation’ itself, but their operations are hyper-mediated.

Place-world, as an ideological construct, does not believe that it is implicated in this exclusivity because it has become associated, in the context of capitalist globalisation, with a kind of plucky particularity – it is ‘a form of Romanticism: countering the displacements of modernity with the politics and poetics of place’; a gesture ‘always aware of its futility’, ‘a cry of the heart in

a heartless world'¹⁵. In Ireland, as elsewhere, it is sentimentally subtended by nostalgia; *Dinnseanchas*, for example, as a plumb-line to the pedagogy of locality, or a preoccupation, especially in literature, with place as an 'unseverable aspect of self', or a form of 'captivity'.¹⁶ Such subjectivities, based on an often ornery attachment to locality that is philosophically corroborated by phenomenology, are in fact thoroughly – paradoxically – modern in their rationale, since they mount what Negri describes as a 'humanistic resistance' contingent on the reconfiguration of use-value (which enters onto the scene of a global market as exchange-value) in terms of territory; in a significant way, place-world is bound up with *ownership* of place, and this does not diminish when the right of somatographic sovereignty is guaranteed by the collective identity of citizenship.¹⁷ The implications of this for at least one instalment of Sean Hillen's *Irelantis* are significant – 'The Great Pyramids of Carlingford Lough', which fakes Ireland as science fiction by bringing the pyramids of Giza and a view of nearby planets to bear on a John Hinde representation of Carlingford Lough, models, by extension, the practice of civic engagement through *perspectivalism*; the protagonist of the image, a man in a signature Hinde red jumper, is taking in the scene from the kind of raised and cleared, panoptical, vantage point associated with Romantic technology. Palladianism, ordinance survey, quadrants, landscaping, and specular aids like telescopes and scenic routes calibrate compositional arbitrations which cohere as 'views' when approached from the proper position: the mandorla, as it were, of the sovereign citizen reproduced as clearings, viewpoints, parklands, watching-posts, and other public 'niches' occupying an ambivalent position between surveillance and consumerism (Carlingford, close to the border between north and south and containing, in this instance, a piece of floating 'Giza' ['border'], is thoroughly enmeshed in this). The art of the place-world always reprises this system of compositional selectivity, because it is always contingent on the subjective apprehension of a representative body metonymised by variants on the *gaze*, and where *Irelantis* responds to this is in its embrace of the artificial nature of this figure. In collecting, instead of neutralising or obscuring, the excremental evidence of discarded, hyperreal viewpoints and ocular compositions

(from tourist postcards to Hollywood special effects), Hillen's series is not actually departing from the aspirational logic of the picturesque – merely taking it to its most idiotic conclusion by means of the *sinthome*.

¹ William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1965), p. 139.

² Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass., 2007), p. 128.

³ Morton, p. 129.

⁴ John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (Faber and Faber: London, 1974), p. 37.

⁵ In interview with Dennis Sampson, 'A Conversation with John McGahern', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (July, 1991), pp. 13-18 [p. 17].

⁶ Sampson, *Young John McGahern: Becoming a Novelist* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2012), pp. 12.

⁷ Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 16-17.

⁸ See Deirdre Toomey, 'Away', *Yeats Annual* 10 (1993), pp. 3-33.

⁹ Morton, p. 208.

¹⁰ Quoted in Toomey, p. 137.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Proust and the Sense of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 3-4.

¹² Bob Geldof, speaking at the 'Let's Stay Together' rally against Scottish independence at Trafalgar Square, London, 15th September 2014.

¹³ Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, 'Nationalism and the Imagination', *Lectora* 15 (2009), pp. 75-98 [p. 79].

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, 'The Environmental Experience', *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. Günter Figal, trans. Jerome Veith (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2009), pp. 33-37 [p. 35].

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2007), p. 172.

¹⁶ John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Lilliput: Dublin, 1991), p. 31.

¹⁷ Antonio Negri, 'Value and Affect', trans. Michael Hardt, *Boundary* 26.2 (Summer, 2009), pp. 77-99 [p. 84].

Plates

Fig. 1, ‘The Great Pyramids of Carlingford Lough’, from Seán Hillen, *Irelantis* (1999)



Fig. 2, John Lavery, *Michael Collins* (1922)



Fig. 3, Matt Calderwood, *Screen* (2005)



Fig. 4, Michael Farrell, *Madonna Irlanda* (1974)



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